

AT!



Nikolai Nosov

RAT-A-TAT-TAT!

Stories
Drawings
by Ferman Ogorodnikov



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Translation from the Russian

Н. Носов

ТУК-ТУК-ТУК!

На английском языке

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Story-Tellers

Mishutka and Stasik were sitting on a bench in the garden, talking.

But they were not talking about the kind of things boys usually talk about. They were telling each other tall tales, as if they had made a bet to see who could lie the best.

"How old are you?" Mishutka said.

"Ninety-five. How old are you?"

"I'm a hundred and forty. You know," Mishutka said, "I used to be very big, as big as Uncle Boris. But then I got little again."

Stasik said:

"I used to be little, then I got big, and then I got little again. Soon I'll start getting bigger again."

"When I was big I could swim across the river," Mishutka said.

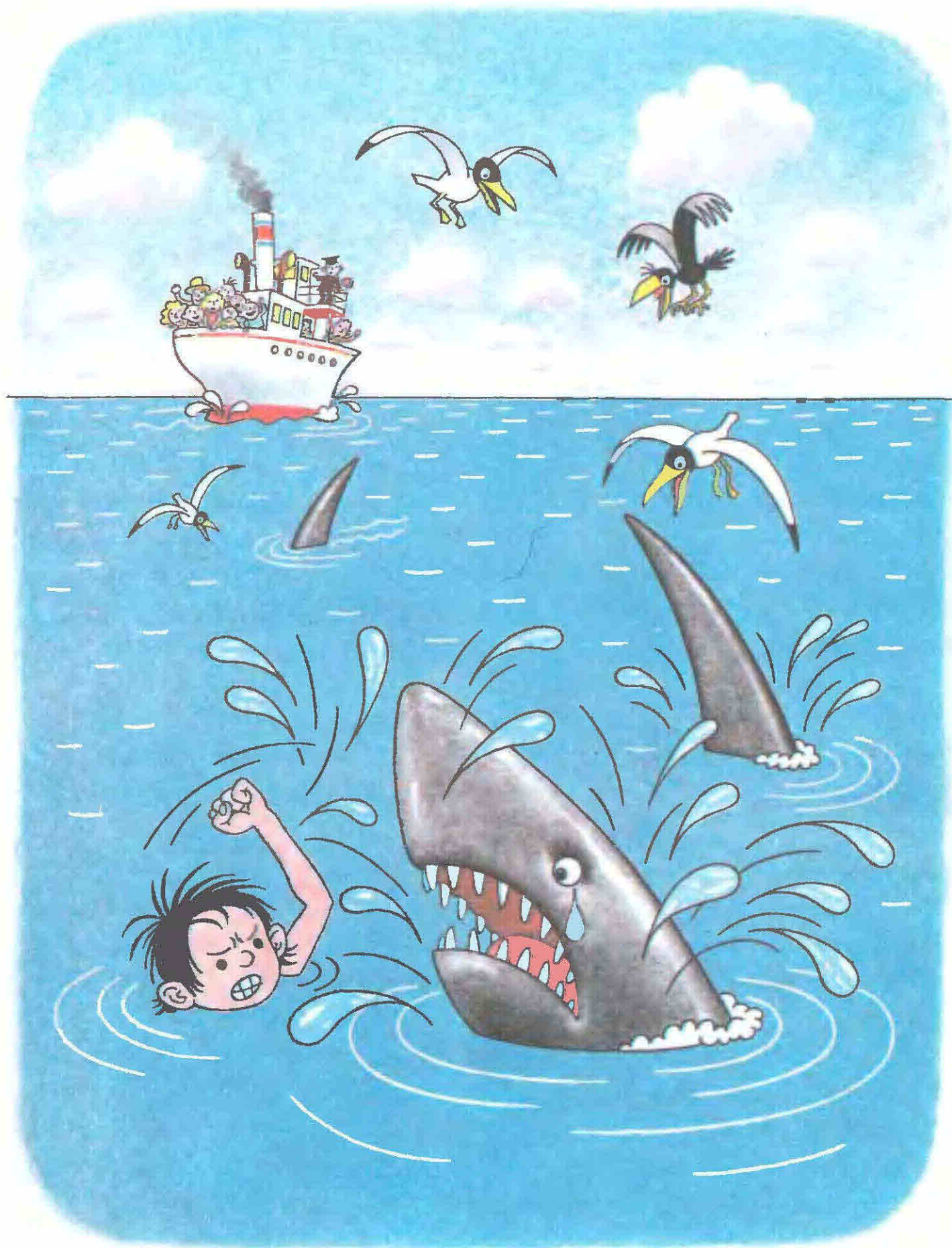
"Huh! I could swim across the sea."

"So what! I could swim across the ocean."

"I used to know how to fly!"

"Let's see you do it!"

"I can't any more. I forgot how to."



"Once, when I was swimming in the sea," Mishutka said, "a shark headed straight for me. I socked it hard, but it snapped my head off anyway."

"That's not true!"

"Yes, it is!"

"Why didn't you die?"

"Why should I? I swam back to the shore and went home."

"Without your head?"

"Sure. What do I need a head for?"

"How could you see where you were going if you didn't have a head?"

"I just kept on walking. It's not hard to walk without your head."

"How come you have a head now?"

"It's a new one that grew on my neck."

"He sure made up a good story," Stasik thought enviously. He wanted to think up something still better. So he said: "That's nothing! I went to Africa once and a crocodile gobbled me up."

"That's a lie!" Mishutka said and laughed.

"No, it isn't."

"How come you're still alive?"

"He spat me out later."

Mishutka said nothing. Now he wanted to think of a still better story than Stasik. After thinking for several minutes, he said:

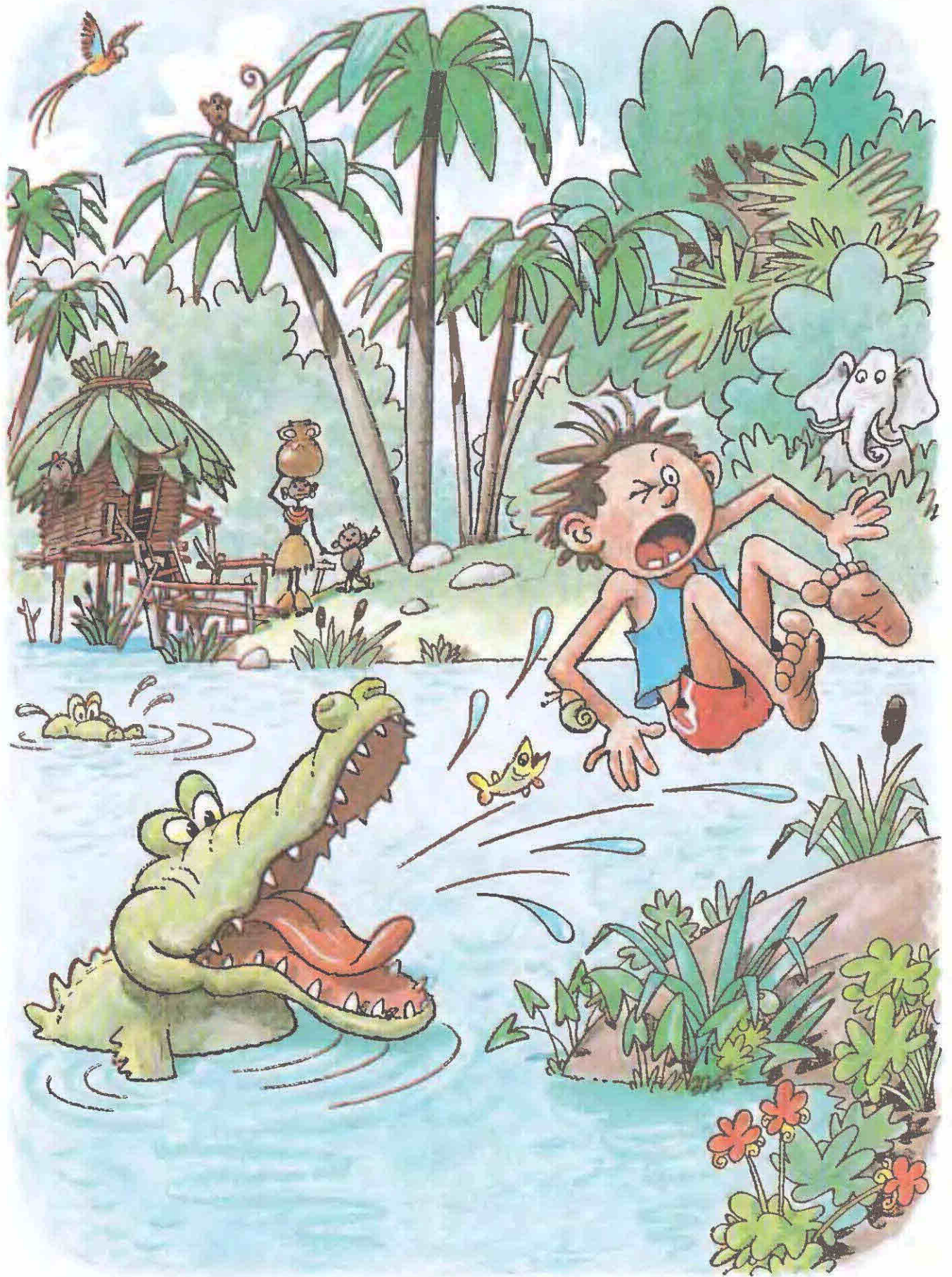
"Once, I was walking down the street. There were cars and trucks and trolleys everywhere."

"I know, I know!" Stasik shouted. "Now you're going to say that you were run over. You lied about that already."

"I wasn't going to say that."

"All right. Keep on lying."

"Well, I was just walking along, minding my own business."



Suddenly I saw a bus coming towards me. I didn't notice it until I stepped on it. Cr-rack! I just crunched it to pieces."

"Ha-ha-ha! Some story!"

"It's the truth!"

"How could you crush a bus?"

"It was just a very small one. It was really a toy bus. A little boy was dragging it along on a string."

"That's nothing," said Stasik. "I once flew to the Moon."

"Come off it!" laughed Mishutka.

"Don't you believe me? Honest I did."

"How did you get there?"

"In a rocket, of course. How else could you get to the Moon? As if you didn't know!"

"And what did you see on the Moon?"

"Oh, er..." Stasik hesitated. "What did I see there? I didn't see anything."

"Ha-ha-ha!" laughed Mishutka. "And he says he flew to the Moon!"

"Of course I did."

"Then why didn't you see anything?"

"Because it was dark. I flew there at night. In a dream. I got into a rocket and flew off into space. Whee! And then back again... Thump! And then I woke up."

"Oh," said Mishutka slowly. "You should have said so before. I didn't know you went there in a dream."

Just then Igor, a neighbour's boy, came over and sat down on the bench beside them. He listened to them for a while and then said:

"What a pack of lies! Aren't you ashamed of yourselves!"

"Why should we be? We're not fooling anyone," Stasik said. "We're just thinking things up, like making up fairy-tales."

"Fairy-tales!" Igor snorted. "What a baby's game!"

"You think it's so easy to make up stories?"

"Sure it is."

"All right! You think of something."

"Just give me a second to think and I will," Igor said. Mishutka and Stasik were glad there was someone else to listen to, so they sat back and waited.

"Wait a sec," Igor said again. "Uhh... Mmmm... Umm..."

"All you're saying is 'uh' and 'mm'!"

"Wait a minute. Give me a chance to think."

"Go on and think."

"Uhh..." Igor said again and looked at the sky. "Wait! Ummm..."

"Well? You said it was easy. You said it was a baby's game."

"Wait! Ah, I know! Once I teased a dog and it bit me. Here, you can still see the scar on my leg."

"But what did you make up about it?"

"Nothing. I told you exactly what happened."

"And you said you knew how to make up stories!"

"I do, but not like you. You make up a pack of lies, and what's the use? I lied yesterday and really had a good time."

"Why?"

"Because. Yesterday my ma and dad went visiting, and Tanya and I stayed home. Tanya went to bed, but I got into the cupboard and ate half a jar of jam. Then I thought I'd get a licking, so I smeared some of the jam on her mouth. When Mummy came home she said, 'Who ate the jam?' and I said, 'Tanya.' Mummy went over to her and saw that she had jam round her mouth. This morning Mummy punished her, but she gave me some more jam. See what a good time I had!"

"Your sister was punished because of you, and you had a good time!" Mishutka said.

"So what?"

"So nothing. But you're a ... what-do-you-call-it? A *real* liar! That's what you are!"

"You're a bunch of liars yourselves!"

"Go away! We don't even want to sit next to you."

"I wouldn't even stay here if you asked me."

Igor got up and walked away. Mishutka and Stasik decided to go home, too. On the way they passed an ice-cream stand. They stopped and dug into their pockets, to see how much money they had. There was only enough for one ice-cream.

"Let's buy one and divide it in half," Stasik said.

The lady handed them an ice-cream.

"Come on, let's go home," Mishutka said. "Then we can cut it with a knife and it'll be even."

"All right."

They met Tanya on the stairs. Her eyes were red from crying.

"What were you crying about?" Mishutka asked.

"Mummy wouldn't let me go outside to play."

"Why not?"

"'Cause of the jam. But I didn't eat it. Igor said I did. He must have eaten it, and then he said I did."

"Sure he ate it. He even boasted about it. Don't cry. Come on up to my house, and I'll give you my half of the ice-cream," Mishutka said.

"And I'll give you my half, I'll just have a lick and then I'll give it to you," Stasik promised.

"Don't you want it?"

"No. We've already had ten each today," Stasik said.

"Let's cut it into three pieces," Tanya said.

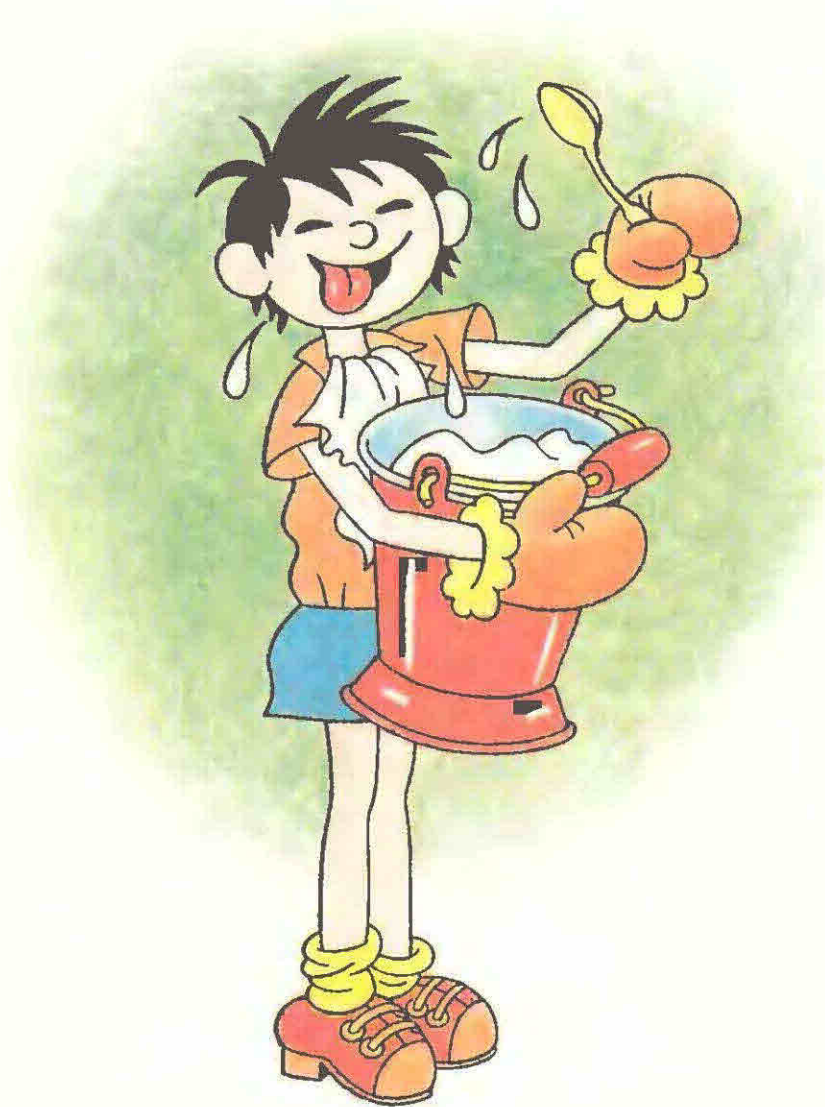
"That's right," Stasik said. "'Cause if you eat the whole ice-cream yourself you'll get a sore throat."

So they went to Mishutka's house and cut the ice-cream into three even parts.

"Yummy! I love ice-cream," Mishutka said. "You know, once I ate a whole pail of ice-cream."

“No, you didn’t!” Tanya said and laughed. “Nobody’ll ever believe you.”

“But it was just a very tiny pail. It was made out of paper, and was just as big as a cup.”



A Live Hat

Murzik was a kitten. He was sitting on the floor by the chest of drawers, trying to catch a fly. There was a hat lying on the very edge of the chest. Murzik saw the fly settle on it. He jumped up and sunk his claws into the hat. It slid off the chest, Murzik lost his grip and tumbled down. Then the hat came floating down on top of him. Where was Murzik now?

Vova and Vadik were busy at their colouring books. They hadn't seen the hat fall on Murzik, though they had heard a strange noise.

Vova turned to see what it was. There was the hat on the floor. He went over to pick it up. But as soon as he bent down he cried:

"Help!"

"What's the matter?" Vadik asked.

"It's a-a-alive!"

"Who?"

"The h-h-hat!"

"Don't be silly."

"B-b-but it is!"

Vadik got up to see for himself.

All of a sudden the hat began creeping towards him.

He screamed and ran for the sofa.

Vova jumped right up after him.

Meanwhile, the hat had crawled to the middle of the room and stopped. The boys' hearts were pounding as they watched it. The hat headed towards them.

"Oh!"

"Help!"

They jumped down and dashed out of the room. When they reached the kitchen they slammed the door behind them.

"What's the matter with that hat? Why is it creeping around like that?" Vova wondered.

"Maybe someone's pulling it along by a string."

"Go have a look."

"Let's go together. I'll take the poker. If it starts creeping towards us, I'll hit it hard."

"Wait! I'll take a poker, too."

"We only have one."

"Then I'll take a ski pole."

They armed themselves with the poker and the ski pole, opened the door slowly and looked out.

"Where is it?"

"Over there, in the corner."

The hat just lay there on the floor.

"See? It's afraid of us now!"

"Watch me scare it," said Vova.

He began whacking his poker against the leg of the table.

"Hey, you!"

But the hat did not move.

"Let's pelt it with potatoes," said Vadik.

They went back into the kitchen for potatoes and then began throwing them at the hat. Finally, Vadik hit it. The hat jumped into the air and yowled: "MIAOW!"

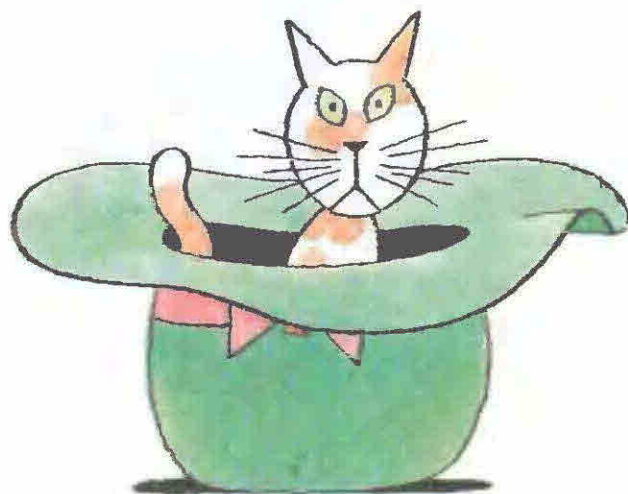
There was a bit of grey tail sticking out from under the brim.

"Murzik!" the boys shouted.

Vadik grabbed the kitten and hugged it.

“Poor Murzik! How did you ever get under that hat?”

But Murzik said nothing. He just purred and squinted in the bright light.



The Car Ride

When Mishka and I were still very little we longed to have a ride in a car, but never managed to get one. No matter how hard we begged the drivers, no one would take us. One day we were playing in the yard, when we saw a car stop right by our gate. The driver got out and went off somewhere. We ran up to the car.

"It's a Volga," I said.

"No, it's a Moskvich," Mishka objected.

"A lot you know!" I exclaimed.

"Of course it's a Moskvich," Mishka retorted. "Look at its hat."

"What hat?" I said. "Cars don't have hats. That's called a bonnet! Just look at its chassis."

Mishka looked and said:

"It's got a sausage like a Moskvich."

"A sausage is something you eat," I said. "Cars don't have sausages."

"But you said it had a sausage yourself. Stupid. Talking about things you don't understand!"

Mishka went up to the back of the car and said:

"But a Volga doesn't have a buffer. It's the Moskvich that has a buffer."

"If I were you, I'd just shut up," I said. "Buffers, indeed! It's railway carriages that have buffers. Cars have bumpers. The Moskvich and the Volga both have bumpers."

Mishka felt the bumper with his hands and said:

"We could sit on this and go for a ride."

"No, we mustn't do that," I told him.

"Don't be scared. We'll just have a little ride and then jump off."

At that point the driver returned and got into the car. Mishka ran along behind, hopped onto the bumper and whispered:

"Jump on, quick! Hurry up!"

"No, we mustn't!" I said.

But Mishka wouldn't listen.

"Jump on, quick! Cowardy custard!"

I scrambled on beside him. The car started up and gathered speed. Misha was scared stiff.

"I'm going to jump off!"

"Don't do that," I said. "You'll get hurt!"

But he wouldn't listen.

"I'm going to jump off! I'm going to jump off!"

He started to put one foot down. I looked round and saw another car speeding along behind us.

"Don't you dare!" I shouted. "You'll get run over!"

People on the pavement were stopping and looking at us. A policeman blew his whistle at a crossroads. Mishka was so scared that he put his feet on the ground without letting go of the bumper and got dragged along the road. I grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and tried to pull him up. The car stopped, but I went on pulling. In the end Mishka scrambled up again.



A crowd of people gathered round us.

"Hold on tight, you fathead!" I shouted.

Everyone burst out laughing. I saw we had stopped, and jumped down.

"Get down," I ordered Mishka.

He was too scared to understand what I was saying. I had to pull him off the bumper by force. The policeman came up and wrote down the registration number. The driver got out, and everyone rushed up to him.

"Can't you see what's happening at the back?"

They forgot all about us.

"Let's go!" I whispered to Mishka.

We sidled off, slipped down an alley and raced all the way home. Mishka's trousers were torn and his knees were grazed and bleeding. That happened when he was dragged along the road. He got a right ticking off from his mum for that.

"Trousers don't matter," he said later. "They can be mended. And my knees'll get better on their own. It's the driver I feel sorry for. He'll probably get into trouble because of us. Did you see the policeman write down his registration number?"

"We should have stayed and told him that it wasn't the driver's fault," I said.

"Let's write the policeman a letter," said Mishka.

So we sat down and tried to write a letter. We must have wasted about twenty sheets of papers, but in the end we wrote:

"Dear Comrade Policeman, you were wrong to write down the number. What we mean is, you wrote down the right number, only the driver's not to blame. Me and Mishka are to blame, because we jumped on without him knowing. He's a good driver and doesn't break the rules."

On the envelope we wrote:

“To the policeman on the corner of Gorky Street and Bolshaya Gruzinskaya.”

Then we stuck it down and posted it. I only hope it gets there!



A Bit of Imagination

Me and Vovka had to stay in because we'd broken the sugar-bowl. When Mum went out, Kotka came round and said:

"Let's play a game."

"What about hide-and-seek?" I said.

"But there's nowhere here to hide!" objected Kotka.

"That's what you think! I'll hide so that you'll never find me. You just need to use a bit of imagination."

"Go on and hide then. I'll find you in a trice."

Kotka went into the corridor and began to count up to twenty-five. Vovka ran into the room and I went into the pantry. There was some bast matting lying on the pantry floor. I crawled under it and curled up into a ball.

Kotka finished counting to twenty-five and went to look for us. He found Vovka straightaway under the bed and began to look for me. He hunted all round the room and the kitchen. Then he went into the pantry, stopped right beside me and said:

"There's nothing in here but saucepans, a broken table and some old matting. He's not in here."

Then he went back to the room and asked:

"Where is he? You haven't seen him, have you, Vovka?"

"Perhaps he's in the cupboard," said Vovka. "Open it up and have a look... No, he's not in there."

"Perhaps he's climbed into the sideboard? No! Where can he have got to?"

"I know!" shouted Vovka. "He's in the trunk!"

"That's right! There's nowhere else he can be. Why didn't we think of it before!"

They ran up to the trunk and tried to open the lid, but it wouldn't budge.

"It's locked," said Kotka.

"Perhaps he's holding it inside."

They hammered on the lid and shouted:

"Come on out!"

"Let's turn it over," said Vovka. "Come on, you hold this side! One, two, three, heave-ho!"

Crrash! The trunk toppled over, making the floor shake.

"No, I don't think he's in there," said Kotka. "He couldn't be sitting in there upside down."

"Then he must be in the kitchen under the stove," said Vovka.

They ran into the kitchen and began to dig around under the stove with a poker, shouting: "Come on out! We know where you are!"

I nearly hooted with laughter.

"Hang on," said Vovka. "I think I've got him."

"Pull him out then."

"I'll just hook the poker into him... That's it! Now let's see who we've got here... Ugh! Some old felt boots! Where on earth is he?"

"I don't know. I'm not playing anymore. Come out!" Kotka shouted. "The game's over! Or just stay where you are, if you like."

They went back into the room.

"Perhaps he's in the chest of drawers, eh?" Vovka asked.

There was a scraping sound.

"Why look in the chest of drawers! No one could hide in a drawer, stupid!" said Kotka angrily and went into the corridor.

"Why couldn't they? I'll check just in case," Vovka replied. There was a long scraping of drawers, then suddenly a shout: "Kotka, come here quick!"

"Have you found him?" Kotka asked.

"No, I can't get out."

"Out of what?"

"The chest of drawers. I'm in the chest of drawers."

"What did you get in there for?"

"I wanted to find out if you could hide in a drawer, but the drawer's got stuck and now I can't get out."

I hooted with laughter, unable to stop myself any longer. Kotka heard and rushed to find me.

"Pull me out first!" Vovka begged him.

"Stop shouting! I can't hear where his laugh is coming from!"

"Pull me out, please! I'm scared inside this drawer!"

Kotka pulled open the drawer and helped Vovka climb out. Then they both ran into the pantry. Kotka tripped up on me and fell over.

"Some idiot's left a pile of matting here!" he shouted and kicked at it angrily.

I yelled like mad and crawled out from under the matting.

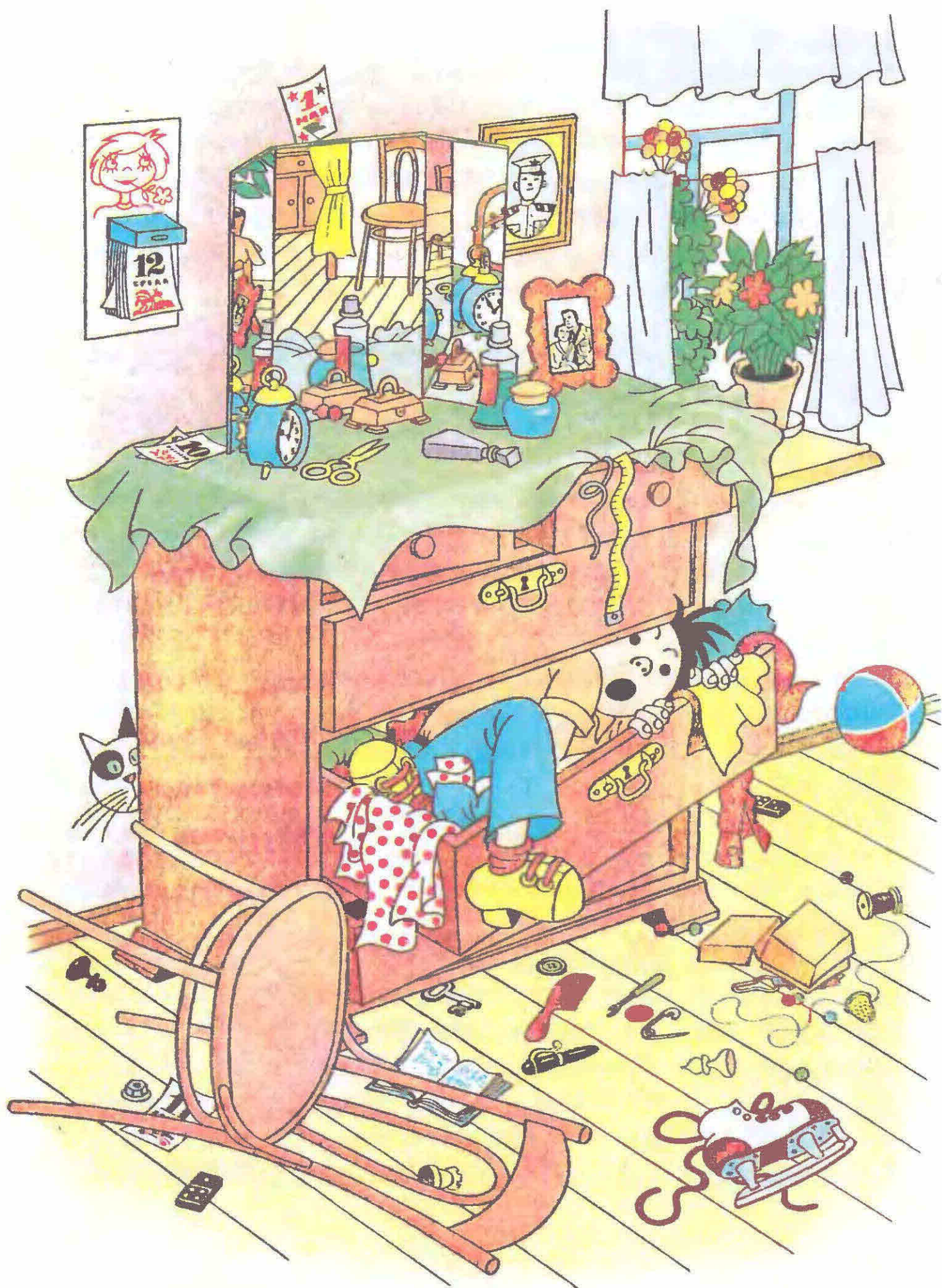
"Who do you think you're kicking?"

He saw me and gave a whoop of delight.

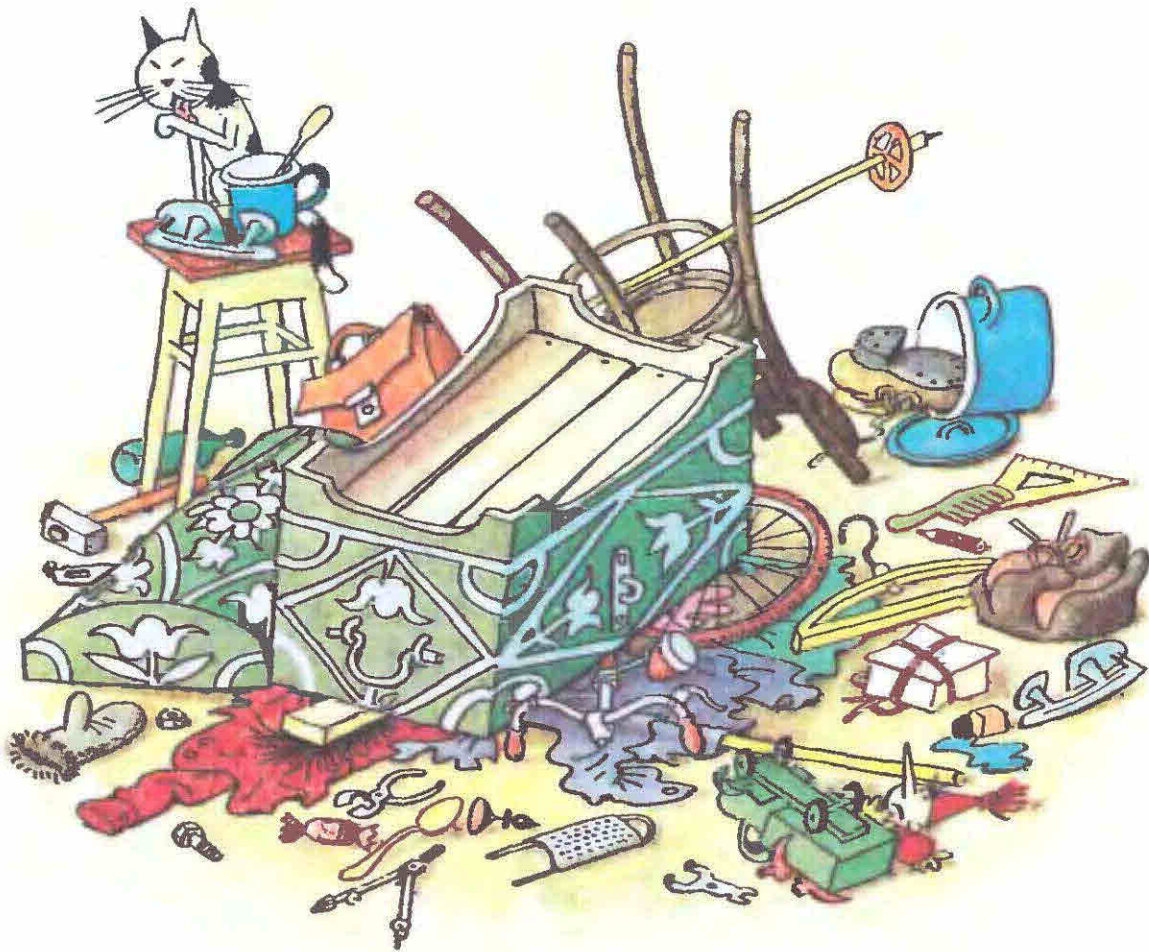
"Got you!" Then he ran into the corridor shouting, "Tra-lah-lah, magic wand! Your turn now!"

"It's no good tra-lah-lahing, 'cos I'm not playing anymore," I said. "It's no fun getting kicked."

I went into the room and gasped in dismay. What a mess!



The cupboards were open, the drawers pulled out, things were strewn all over the floor and the trunk was upside-down! It took us ages to make the room nice and tidy again.



Putty

The glazier came round one day to putty the window frames for the cold winter. Kostya and Shurik stood watching him finish the job. When he had gone, they prised out the putty from the windows and began to model animals from it. The trouble was the animals did not come out right. Then Kostya did a snake and said to Shurik,

“See what I’ve made.”

Shurik had a close look and said,

“Liver sausage.”

Kostya took offence at that and hid the putty in his pocket. Then they went off together to the pictures. All the way Shurik worried about the putty.

“What’s happened to the putty?” he kept asking.

At last Kostya told him,

“Here it is in my pocket. You didn’t think I’d eaten it, did you?”

They bought their tickets at the cinema and also got themselves two peppermint bars to eat while they were watching the performance. All of a sudden the bell went and Kostya rushed off to get two seats; Shurik meanwhile got stuck in the crowd.

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Kostya found two good seats, sat down on one and 'booked' the other with his piece of putty. Suddenly a stranger came up and sat down on the putty.

Kostya said to him,

"That place is taken, it's for Shurik."

"Who the blazes is Shurik? I'm sitting here," said the man.

At that moment Shurik came rushing up and took his seat on the other side of Kostya.

"Where's the putty?" he asked.

"Ssshhh!" whispered Kostya winking in the man's direction.

"Who's that?" asked Shurik.

"No idea."

"What are you scared of him for?"

"He's sitting on the putty."

"Then what did you give it to him for?"

"I didn't, he just sat on it."

"Then take it."

At that point the lights went out and the film started.

"Excuse me, mister," said Kostya. "Give me my putty."

"What putty?"

"The putty we dug out of the window frame."

"Dug out of the window frame?"

"That's right. Let's have it, mister."

"But I didn't take it."

"We know you didn't take it. You're sitting on it."

"Sitting?!"

"Yes."

The man jumped out of his seat.

"Then why didn't you say so before, you nit?!" he shouted.

"Well, I did tell you the seat was taken."

"When exactly did you tell me? When I'd already sat down!"

"How was I to know you were going to sit here?"

The stranger stood up and began to feel around on the seat.

"Well, where is this putty, you nincompoop?" he hissed between his teeth.

"Hold on, there it is!" cried Kostya.

"Where?"

"There, all over the seat. Don't worry, we'll clean it all off straightaway."

"You'd better, you little twerp," spluttered the man.

"Sit down!" cried voices behind them.

"I can't," explained the man. "There's putty on the seat." At long last the boys had scraped off all the putty.

"It's all right now," they said. "Sit down."

The man took his seat.

And all was quiet again. Kostya wanted to watch the film in peace, but he suddenly heard Shurik whisper,

"Have you eaten your bar yet?"

"Not yet. Have you?"

"No, I haven't either. Let's eat it now."

"Yes, all right."

Crunching began. Kostya suddenly spluttered and wheezed, "Shurik, what's your bar like?"

"Yum, yum."

"Mine's horrible. It's all gooey. Probably melted in my pocket."

"Where's the putty?"

"It's here, in my pocket... Just a minute! This isn't putty, it's my peppermint bar. Ugh! I must have mixed them up in the dark. Oo-erh! No wonder it didn't taste very nice."

In his disgust, Kostya threw the putty onto the floor.

"Why did you throw it away?" asked Shurik.

"What do I want it for now?"

"Maybe you don't, but I might," hissed Shurik and crawled under the seat in search of the putty.

"Where is it?" he said, beginning to get angry. "How can I find anything in the dark?"



"All right, I'll find it," said Kostya getting down on the floor to look under the seats.

"Ouch!" suddenly came a voice from down below. "I say, mister, get off!"

"Who's that?"

"It's me."

"Who's me?"

"Me, Kostya. Get off me."

"But I'm not on you."

"Yes you are, you're treading on my hand."

"Serves you right for crawling under the seat."

"I was looking for my putty."

Kostya crawled under the seat and suddenly found himself nose to nose with Shurik.

"Who's that?" he said in a frightened voice.

"It's me, Shurik."

"Well, this is me, Kostya."

"Found it?"

"I haven't found anything."

"Neither have I."

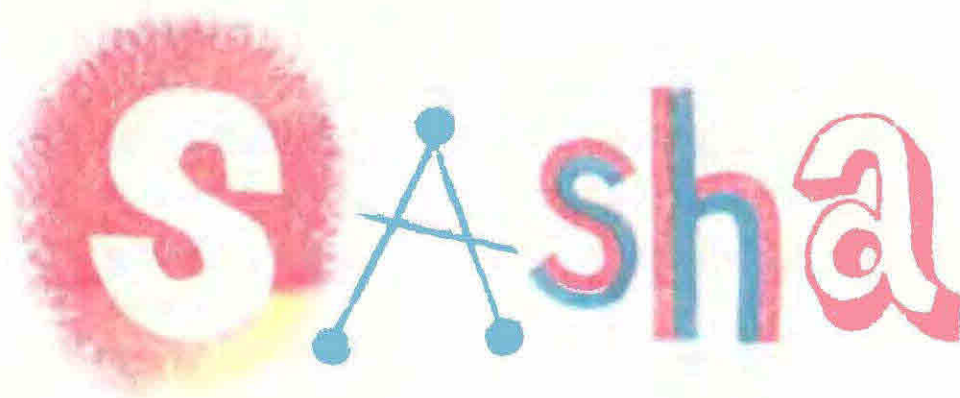
"Maybe we'd better watch the rest of the film, otherwise we'll scare the living daylights out of the audience; they'll think dogs are poking their noses round their legs."

Kostya and Shurik crawled back under the seats and sat down finally — just in time to see the word "END" flash up on the screen.

The patrons all rushed towards the exit. The two boys followed them into the street.

"What sort of film were we watching?" asked Kostya. "I couldn't make head or tail of it."

"You don't think I understood it, do you?" answered Shurik. "What a load of rubbish. Fancy showing films like that!"



Sasha kept on at his mother to buy him a cap gun.

"What do you want that for?" asked his mother. "It's dangerous."

"What's dangerous about it?" he persisted. "If it fired bullets maybe, but not caps. You can't kill anyone with it."

"You never know what might happen," replied his mother. "A cap might jump out and hit you in the eye."

"No it won't," Sasha said. "I'll screw up my eyes while I'm firing it."

"No, no, all sorts of awful things can happen with those guns. If you don't shoot someone you can scare the living daylights out of them." Nor did she buy him the gun.

Now, Sasha had two older sisters, Marina and Ira. He now turned to them.

"Please buy me a cap gun, dear sisters," he implored them. "I want one so much. I'll always do whatever you say, if you do."

"You really are artful, young Sasha," said Marina. "When you need something, you start buttering us up and calling us

your 'dear sisters'. But once Mum's out of the house, you'll change your tune."

"No I won't, I won't. I'll behave myself, you see if I won't."

"All right," said Ira. "Marina and I will think it over. If you give your word to be a good boy, it just may be that we shall buy you the gun."

"I promise, I promise," said Sasha. "Anything you like, if only you get me the gun."

The next day his sisters presented him with the gun and a box of caps. The gun was brand-new and shiny, and there were lots of caps: maybe fifty or a hundred. He could fire away to his heart's delight. Sasha pranced around the room in sheer joy, he hugged the gun, even kissed it, saying,

"My darling, dear little cap gun. How I love you."

After that he scratched his name on the handle and began to fire it. At once the room smelled of the caps, and half an hour later the room was quite blue with smoke.

"That's enough shooting for now," said Ira finally. "It makes me jump each time that gun goes off."

"Cowardy custard!" retorted Sasha. "All girls are cowards."

"Right, I'll show you what cowards we are when I take the gun off you," said Marina.

"I'm going out into the yard then," replied Sasha, "to scare the children with my gun."

And out he went. But there was no one in sight. So straight out the gates he went, and that is where our story really has its beginning. Just at that moment, an old woman was coming down the street. Sashka watched her go by and then — BANG! — he fired his gun just behind her. With a startled cry the old woman stopped in her tracks. Turning round, she said,

"Oh dear, you gave me such a fright. It was you, wasn't it, who shot that gun?"

"No," said Sasha concealing the gun behind him.

"Do you think I can't see the gun in your hands?" said the old woman. "And you're trying to tell me lies. You ought to be ashamed of yourself. I'm going straight to the police-station."

With a shake of her finger she crossed the road and disappeared down a side street.

"Now I'm for it," thought Sasha. "It looks like she really has gone to the police to complain."

He ran home all out of breath.

"What are you looking so scared for, as if a wolf is chasing you?" asked Ira.

"Nothing," said Sasha.

"You'd better own up: it's written all over your face that you're up to something."

"I'm not up to anything," panted Sasha. "It's just that I frightened some old woman."

"What old woman?"

"What do you mean 'what old woman?'" said Sasha. "Just some old woman who was coming down the street; I got her in my sights and shot her with my gun."

"What did you do that for?" asked his sister.

"Don't know myself," said Sasha. "She was walking along and I thought to myself: 'Go on, shoot her.' And I did."

"What happened to her?" asked Ira.

"Nothing. She's gone to the police to complain."

"You see," said Ira, "you promised to behave yourself and now look what you've done."

"It's not my fault the old woman is such a scaredy-cat," said Sasha.

"Now a policeman will come and give you what for," continued Ira. "Then you'll know what you get for scaring people."

"How will he find me?" asked Sasha. "He won't know where I live. He doesn't even know my name."

"He'll find out, don't you worry," said Ira. "Policemen know everything."

For a whole hour Sasha sat meekly at home glancing out of the window all the while to see if a policeman was coming. But no policeman came into sight. After a time he calmed down, perked up a bit and said, "Probably the old grannie wanted to put the wind up me so as to teach me a lesson."

He made up his mind to fire his beloved cap gun and slipped his hand into his pocket. He found the box of caps but no gun. He searched around in his other pocket, but that was empty. Then he began to search the room from top to bottom. He peered under the tables and the settee. The gun had vanished as if the earth had opened up and swallowed it. Tears welled up in his eyes.

"I hardly had time to play with it properly," he sniffed. "Such a lovely gun it was, too."

"Perhaps you lost it in the yard?" asked Ira.

"More likely I dropped it outside the gates," Sasha suddenly thought. He opened the door and rushed across the yard and out into the street. But there was no sign of his gun.

"Someone else must have picked it up and kept it for himself," he pondered miserably. Then all at once he caught sight of a policeman marching quickly across the street from the direction of the side street. And he was coming straight for Sasha's house.

"He's after me," thought Sasha. "That old woman must have told on me."

And he raced home as fast as his legs would carry him.

"Well, found it?" asked Marina and Ira.

"Shhh!" whispered Sasha. "Policeman's on his way."

"Where to?"

"Here, to our house," muttered Sasha.

"Where did you see him?"

"In the street."

Marina and Ira began to laugh at him.

"What a coward you are! One look at a policeman and it scares the pants off you. That policeman is probably on his way somewhere else and isn't coming here at all."

"He doesn't scare me," said Sasha, now plucking up courage. "What's a policeman to me anyway?"

At that moment heavy steps were heard at the door, and suddenly the bell rang. Marina and Ira ran to open the door. Sasha poked his head round the hallway and hissed,

"Don't let him in."

But Marina had already opened the door. And there stood a policeman, with bright and shiny buttons on his tunic. Sasha dropped on all fours and crawled behind the settee.

"Now then, young ladies, where's Flat No. 6?" came the voice of the policeman.

"It's not here," answered Ira. "This is No. 1; if you want No. 6 you must go into the yard, and it's the first door on the right."

"Go into the yard, the first door on the right?" the policeman repeated slowly.

"Yes," said Ira.

Sasha now knew that the policeman hadn't come for him after all, and he was just about to creep out from behind the settee when the policeman asked, "By the way, you don't have a boy named Sasha living here, do you?"

"We do," replied Ira.

"Well, that's the very fellow I want," said the policeman and advanced into the room.

Marina and Ira followed him into the room and saw that Sasha had disappeared somewhere. Marina even glanced under the settee. Sasha saw her and silently threatened her with his clenched fist so that she wouldn't give him away.

"Well then, where's your Sasha?" asked the policeman.

The girls were very frightened for Sasha and did not know

what to answer. Finally Marina said, "You see, it's like this, he's not home right now. I think he's gone for a walk."

"What do you know about him?" asked Ira.

"What do I know?" said the policeman. "I know his name's Sasha. And I know he used to have a brand-new gun and that he doesn't have it any more."

"He knows everything!" thought Sasha. His nose began to itch with fear, and suddenly he let out a sneeze: "Aachoo!"

"Who's that?" asked the policeman in surprise.

"That's our... That's our dog," Marina told a lie.

"What's it doing under the settee then?" asked the policeman.

"Oh, it always sleeps under the settee," said Marina, continuing to lie.

"What's its name?" asked the policeman.

"Um... Bobby," said Marina going as red as a beetroot.

"Bobby, Bobby, come on, lad!" called the policeman. And he began to whistle for the dog. "Why doesn't it want to come out? Here, boy. Here, boy! No, no good. Is it a good dog? What breed is it?"

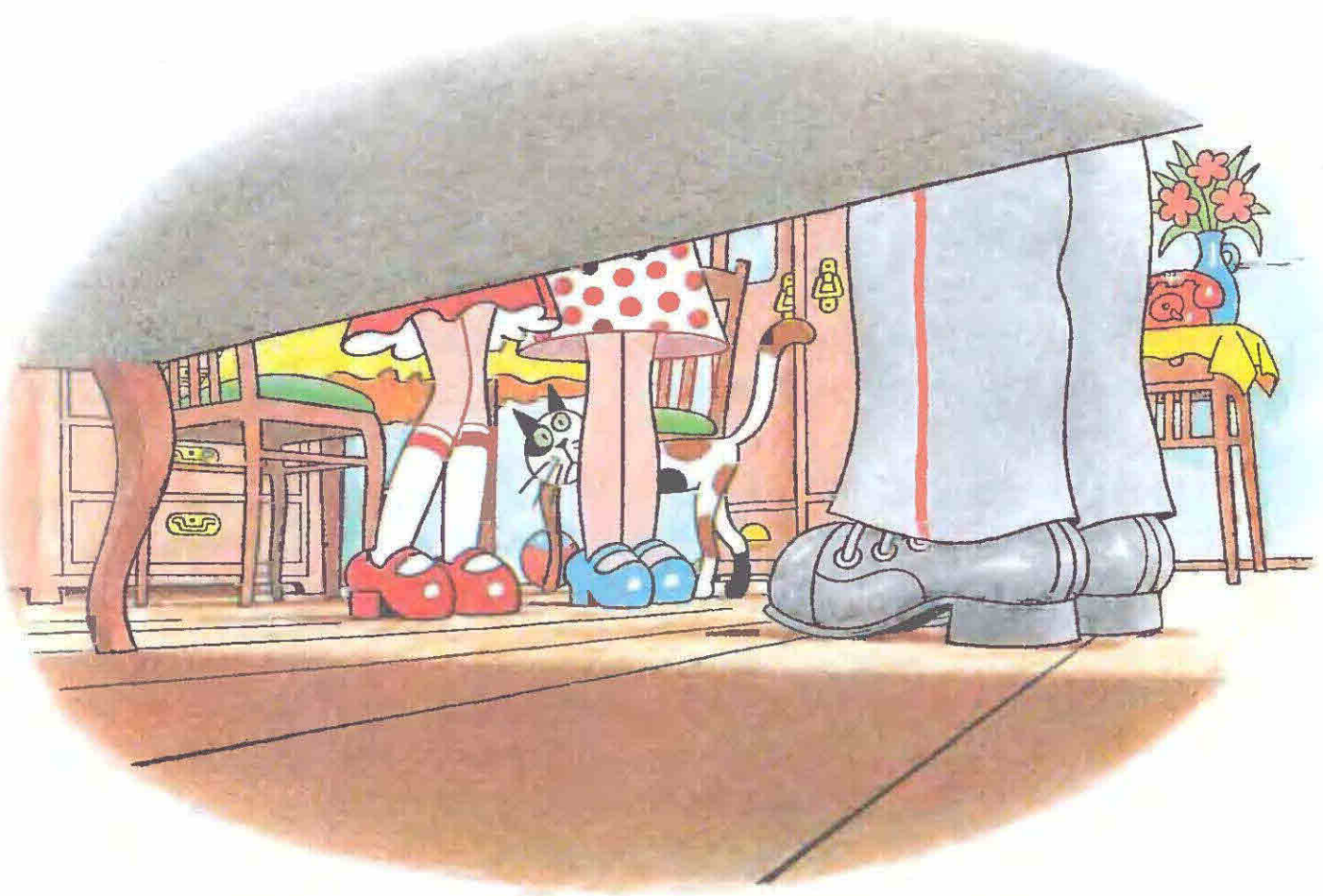
"Ummm..." said Marina, trying to drag it out as she thought desperately for an answer. "Ummm..." She just couldn't think what sort of breeds dogs had. "Now what is its breed?" she said. "What is it now? It's a good breed, I know that... Oh yes, a long-haired fox terrier. That's it."

"Oh, what an excellent dog!" said the policeman brightening up. "I know it well. It has such a lovely furry nose."

He bent down and looked under the settee. Sasha was lying there more dead than alive and stared at the policeman wide-eyed. The policeman even whistled from amazement.

"So that's the sort of fox terrier you've got here!" he said. "What are you doing under the settee, eh? Here, boy, come on out, I've got you now."

"I won't come out," wailed Sasha.



“Why not?” asked the policeman.

“You’ll take me down to the station,” said Sasha.

“What for?”

“For the old woman.”

“What old woman?”

“The one I shot, and she got scared.”

“I’ve no idea what old woman you’re going on about,” said the policeman.

“He went outside to fire his cap gun,” explained Ira, “and an old lady passed by and was frightened.”

“Ah, so that’s it,” said the policeman. “So it is his gun?”

And he took from his pocket a brand-new shiny pistol.

"That's it, that's it," exclaimed Ira. "Marina and I bought it for him and he lost it. Where did you find it?"

"Just nearby, in the yard, by your door," replied the policeman calmly. "Well now, own up, why did you scare the old lady?"

"I didn't mean to," said Sasha from under the settee.

"You're telling lies," said the policeman. "I can see it in your eyes. Tell me the truth and I'll let you have your gun back straight-away."

"What will happen to me if I tell the truth?" asked Sasha.

"Nothing'll happen. You'll get your gun back, that's all."

"Won't you take me to the police-station?"

"No."

"I didn't mean to frighten the old woman," said Sasha. "I only wanted to see if she would be scared or not."

"Now that's not nice, young fellow-me-lad," said the policeman. "For that you really ought to be taken to the police-station; but it can't be helped: since I've given my word I'll have to keep it. I shan't take you in this time. But just you watch out: if I catch you getting into any mischief again, you'll be for the high jump. Right, come on out of there and take your cap gun."

"No, I'd prefer to come out afterwards, when you've gone," said Sasha.

"What a funny fellow!" laughed the policeman.

He put the gun on the settee and left. Marina hurried to show the policeman the whereabouts of No. 6, while Sasha crept out from under the settee, set eyes on his gun and cried,

"Here it is, my precious gun. Returned to me once more!"

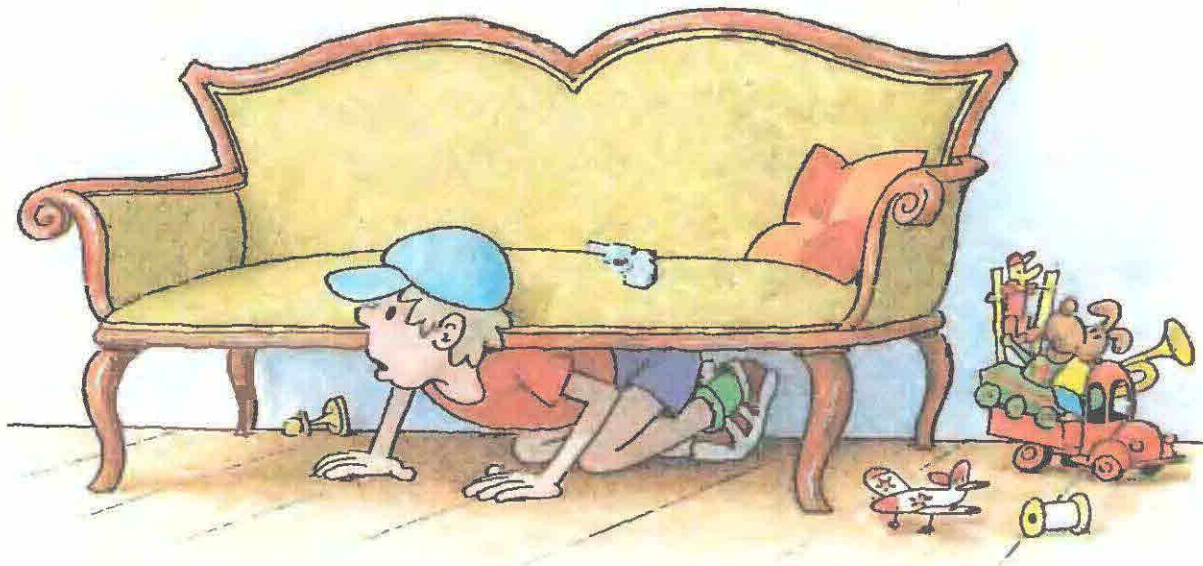
He seized his gun and said, "What I can't make out is how that policeman came to know my name."

"But you wrote your name yourself on the gun," said Ira.

At that moment Marina returned and really set about her brother.

“What a rotten trick to play!” she shouted at him. “Because of you I had to tell lies to the policeman. I could have burned with shame. Just you try any more of your tricks and you won’t catch me sticking up for you. That’s the last time!”

“I won’t be playing tricks again, I promise you,” said Sasha. “I know now that I shouldn’t scare people.”



The Snow Slide

All morning the boys worked hard to make a snow slide in the yard. They took shovelfuls of snow and pulled it up by the shed wall. When the pile of snow was high enough, they poured water over it and went home for dinner. They would make the steps up the side of the slope later.

“By the time we’ve finished dinner, the water will have frozen,” they said. “Then we’ll toboggan down the slide.”

Kotka Chizhov from flat six was a real crafty one! He didn’t help to build the slide. Just stayed at home and watched the others work through the window. They called to him to come out and help, but he just shook his head and spread out his hands as if he wasn’t allowed to. Then as soon as the other boys had gone home, he got dressed quickly, put on his skates and hurried out into the yard. Scrrape, his skates went on the ice. Scrrape, scrrape! He couldn’t even skate properly! He went up to the slide.

“Oo, it’s a great slide!” he said. “I can’t wait to skate down it!”

He started to climb up the slide and fell flat on his face. Scrrash!

“Hey, it’s slippery!” he said.

He started to climb up again and, crrash! He must have fallen down about ten times. He simply couldn’t climb up the slippery slope.

“What can I do?” he thought.

He put on his thinking-cap and had an idea.

"I'll sprinkle some sand on it and then climb up."

So he found a piece of wood and went to the yardman's booth, where there was a box of sand. He scooped some sand out of the box and sprinkled it on the slide in front of him, higher and higher, until he reached the top.

"Now I'll be able to skate down," he said.

He pushed off with one foot and, crrash, fell flat on his face again. His skates couldn't slide over the sand. Kotka lay there on his tummy and said:

"It's no good trying to skate on sand!"

He crawled down the slope on his hands and knees.

At this point the other boys ran up and saw that the slide was covered with sand.

"Who's spoiled our slide?" they cried. "Who's sprinkled sand all over it? Did you see who did it, Kotka?"

"No," said Kotka. "I didn't see. I did it myself, because it was too slippery for me to climb up."

"What a thing to do! We worked hard all morning making a slide, and he goes and sprinkles sand all over it! How are we going to toboggan now?"

"Perhaps it'll snow," Kotka said, "then the snow'll cover up the sand and it'll be alright to toboggan."

"But it might not snow for another week, and we want to toboggan today."

"Well, I don't know," said Kotka.

"So you don't know, eh? You know how to spoil a slide, but not how to put it right! Go and get a spade!"

Kotka took off his skates and fetched a spade.

"Now cover up the sand with snow!"

Kotka sprinkled the slide with snow and the boys poured water over it again.

"There," they said. "When it freezes, we'll be able to toboggan."

Kotka had enjoyed working so much that he even made some little steps up the side of the slope.

“That’s so everyone can climb up easily,” he said. “Or else some silly ass will go and sprinkle it with sand again!”



The Metro

Mummy, Vovka and me went to visit Aunty Olga in Moscow. The very first day Mummy and Aunty Olga went shopping and left me and Vovka at home. They gave us an old photograph album to look at. We looked at it for ages, until we got bored.

“We’ll never see Moscow if we stay at home all the time,” said Vovka.

We looked out of the window. Outside was a Metro station.

“Let’s go for a ride in the Metro,” I said.

We went into the station, bought some tickets and got on a train. At first we were a bit frightened, but then we began enjoying it. We went two stations and got out.

“We’ll just have a look at this station, then go back,” we thought.

So we started looking round the station and suddenly saw a moving staircase with people going up and down it. So we went up and down too. You didn’t need to walk, ’cos the staircase moved by itself.

When we’d had enough of that, we got on a train in the opposite direction.

We went for two stops then got out, but it wasn’t our station!

"We must have come the wrong way," said Vovka.

So we got on another train and went back. But when we got out that wasn't our station either. We got frightened.

"We must ask someone," said Vovka.

"How can we? Do you know the name of the station where we got on?"

"No, do you?"

"No, I don't either."

"Then let's travel round all the stations. Perhaps we'll find it like that," said Vovka.

So we started travelling round the stations. We went round and round, until we got dizzy.

Vovka began to cry.

"Let's go out!"

"Where shall we go?"

"It doesn't matter. I want some fresh air."

"And what will you do up there?"

"I don't like being under the ground."

He began to howl.

"Don't cry," I said. "You'll get taken to the police station."

"I don't care! Boo-hoo-hoo!"

"Oh, alright, come on," I said. "Only don't cry. There's a policeman looking at us."

I grabbed his arm, got him onto a moving staircase and up we went. "I wonder where this will take us," I thought. "What will happen to us now?"

Suddenly we saw Mummy and Aunty Olga going down the moving staircase opposite.

"Mum!" I shouted with all my might.

They saw us and called out:

"What are you doing here?"

"We can't get out of here!" we shouted back.

Before we had time to shout anything else, the staircases took us up and then down. We reached the top and hurried onto the staircase going down, where they had gone.

Suddenly we saw them coming up towards us.

"Where are you going?" they called. "Why didn't you wait for us at the top?"

"We followed you down!"

When we reached the bottom, I said to Vovka:

"Let's wait. They'll come down in a minute."

We waited for ages, but there was no sign of them.

"They must be waiting for us at the top," said Vovka. "Let's go up."

No sooner had we started to go up, than we saw them coming down again.

"We got tired of waiting for you!" they shouted.

Everybody around us was tickled to death.

We reached the top, then hurried down again. This time we found them at last.

Mummy began to scold us for going out without asking, and we told her how we had lost our station.

"I don't see how you could lose your station!" said Aunt Olga. "I travel on the Metro every day and I've never lost my station. Now then, let's go home."

We got on a train and off it went.

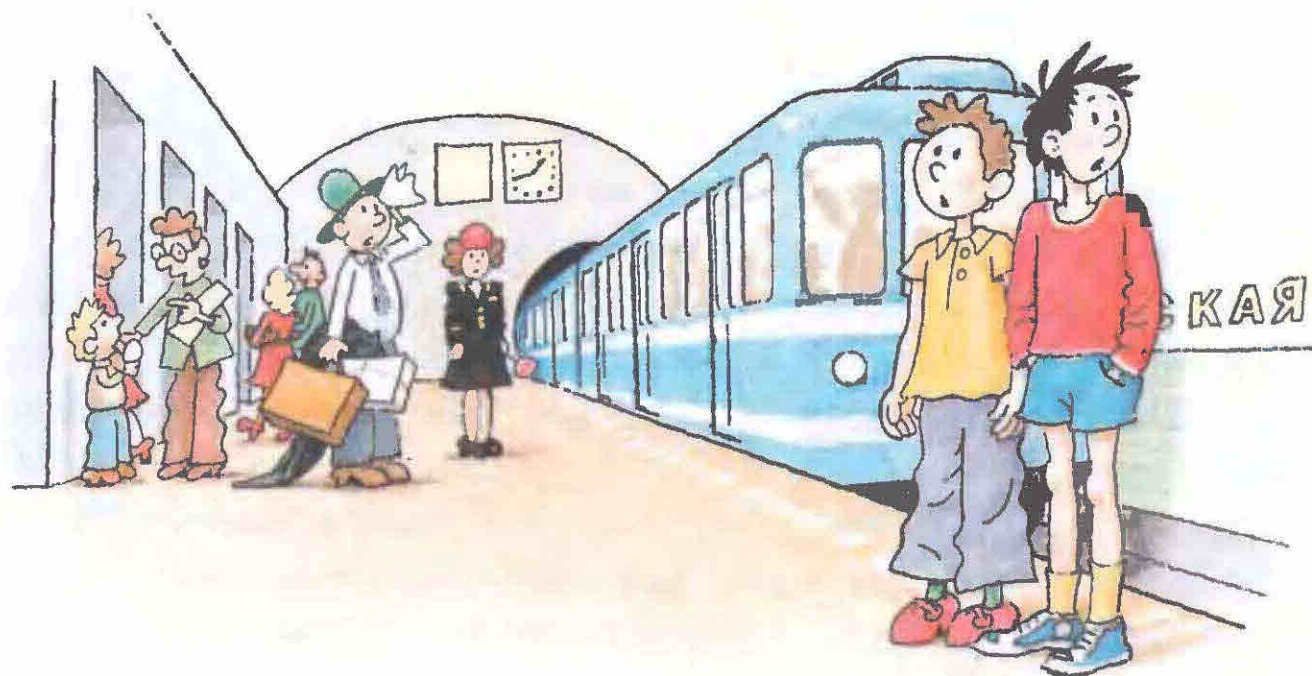
"You're a couple of country bumpkins," said Aunt Olga. "You go looking for your mittens when they're tucked in your belt. You'll lose the nose on your face, if you're not careful."

She teased us like that all the way.

When we got to the station, Aunt Olga exclaimed:

"Well, I never! You've quite confused me! We need the Arbat, but this is Kursk Station. We've come the wrong way."

So we got in another train and went back the other way. Auntie didn't tease us anymore. Or call us country bumpkins.



Cucumbers

Once Pavlik took Kotka fishing with him. But they had no luck that day: the fish simply wouldn't bite, so they went home. On the way, they climbed over the fence into the collective-farm vegetable garden and filled their pockets with cucumbers. The watchman saw them and blew his whistle, but they ran away. Pavlik was afraid he would get into trouble for picking vegetables from the collective-farm plot, so he gave all his cucumbers to Kotka.

Kotka came running home all excited. "Mummy, see what a lot of cucumbers I've brought you."

His pockets were full of cucumbers, he had cucumbers inside his shirt and a large cucumber in each hand.

"Where did you get them from?" asked his mother sternly.

"The vegetable plot."

"What vegetable plot?"

"The collective-farm plot down by the river."

"Who allowed you to take them?"

"Nobody. I picked them myself."

"You stole them, you mean?"

"I didn't steal them. Pavlik took some, so I took some too."

Kotka started pulling the cucumbers out of his pockets.

"Wait a minute," said his mother. "Don't empty your pockets yet."

"But why?"

"Because you are going to take them back at once."

"Oh, but I can't take them back. They grew on the vegetable bed and I picked them. They won't grow any more just the same."

"Never mind, you'll take them and put them back where you got them from."

"I'll throw them away."

"No, you won't. You didn't plant them and take care of them, so you have no right to throw them away."

Kotka began to cry. "There's an old man there, a watchman. He whistled at us and we ran away..."

"Now, you see how naughty you are. Suppose he caught you?"

"He couldn't catch us. He's an old man."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself," said his mother. "That old man is responsible for the cucumbers. When they find out at the farm that all those cucumbers have gone they will blame the old man. Is that nice?"

Mother stuck the cucumbers back into Kotka's pockets and Kotka wept loudly and protested:

"I shan't go. The old man has a gun. He'll shoot me."

"It would serve you right if he did. I don't want a son who steals."

Kotka only cried the louder. "Mummy, come with me, please. It's dark outside. I'm afraid."

"You weren't afraid to take the cucumbers, were you?"

Mother gave Kotka the two cucumbers which didn't fit into his pockets and led him outside.

"If you don't put the cucumbers back you needn't come home."

She went inside the house and closed the door. Kotka started off slowly down the street.

It was quite dark.

"I'll throw them into the ditch and say I took them back," Kotka said to himself, glancing around him. "No, I'd better not. Some-

one might see me, and besides, the old man will get into trouble all through me."

He went down the street, sobbing. He was very scared.

"It's all right for Pavlik," he thought. "He gave me his cucumbers and now he's sitting at home safe and sound. He isn't scared."

He came to the end of the village and took the path over the field. There was not a soul in sight. He was so frightened he almost ran the rest of the way to the vegetable plot. When he got there he stopped outside the watchman's hut and began to cry. The watchman heard him and came over.

"Why are you crying, little boy?"

"I've brought back the cucumbers, Grandad."

"What cucumbers?"

"The ones me and Pavlik picked today. Mummy told me to put them back."

"Oh, I see," said the old watchman. "So it was you I whistled to this afternoon. You managed to pick the cucumbers after all. You little scamps!"

"Pavlik took some and I took some too. He gave me his."

"Never mind what Pavlik does, you ought to know better than to steal from the vegetable plot. See you don't do it again. Now give me the cucumbers and run home."

Kotka pulled out the cucumbers and laid them on the ground.

"Is that all?" asked the old man.

"Yes... No ... not quite. All except one," said Kotka and started crying again.

"Where is it?"

"I ate it, Grandad... I'm sorry, I didn't mean to."

"You ate it, did you? Well, you're welcome to it, I'm sure."

"But ... but, Grandad, won't you get into trouble for it?"

"So that's what you're worried about, is it?" laughed the old man. "No, I won't get into trouble for one cucumber. If you

hadn't brought the others back I might have."

Kotka said good-bye and ran off down the path. Suddenly he stopped and called back: "Grandad, Grandad!"

"What's the trouble now?"

"Grandad, that cucumber I ate, will they say I stole it?"

"Now, I don't know as to that," said the old man. Then he added: "Very well, we'll say you didn't steal it."

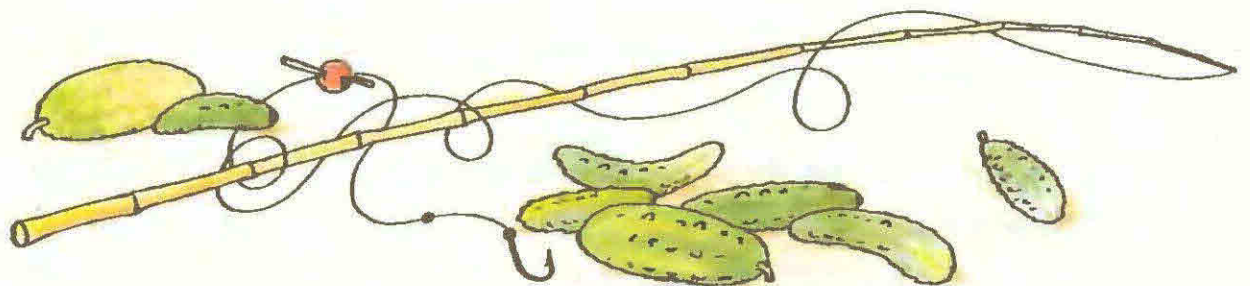
"But..."

"Let's say I made you a present of it."

"Thank you, Grandad. Good night."

"Good night, son."

Kotka raced across the field for all he was worth. He jumped over ditches and across the bridge and when he reached the village he slowed down to a walk. He felt very happy.



Steps

Petya was coming home from nursery school. That day he had learnt to count up to ten. When he reached his house, his little sister Valya was waiting for him by the gate.

"I can count now!" Petya boasted. "They taught us to count at nursery school. Watch me count the steps on the staircase."

They began to walk up the staircase, and Petya counted loudly: "One, two, three, four, five..."

"Why have you stopped?" asked Valya.

"Wait a minute, I've forgotten what step comes next. I'll remember in a moment."

"Alright, try to remember," said Valya.

"No, I can't remember. I'd better go down and start again." So they went down the staircase and began to climb up again.

"One," said Petya, "two, three, four, five..."

He stopped again.

"Have you forgotten?" Valya asked.

"Yes. What can it be? I remembered it, then forgot it again all of a sudden. Let's try once more."

They went down the staircase, and Petya began all over again.

"One, two, three, four, five..."

"Perhaps it's twenty-five?" Valya suggested.

"No, it isn't! You're stopping me from thinking. It's all your fault that I've forgotten! I'll have to start again."

"Well, I'm not starting again!" said Valya. "All this up and down, up and down! It's made my feet ache."

"You needn't if you don't want to," Petya replied. "But I'm not going up until I remember."

Valya went indoors and said to Mummy:

"Petya's counting the steps on the staircase, Mum. One, two, three, four, five, but he can't remember what comes next."

"It's six," said Mummy.

Valya hurried back to the staircase, where Petya was still counting:

"One, two, three, four, five..."

"Six!" whispered Valya. "Six! Six!"

"Six!" cried Petya happily. "Seven, eight, nine, ten."

It was a good thing that the staircase stopped then, or he would never have got home, because he'd only learnt to count up to ten.



Visiting Grandpa

Shurik and I spent last summer visiting Grandpa. Shurik is my kid brother. I was seven and already at school, but he wasn't.

Still, he never obeys me. Well, I don't care. The day we arrived we explored the yard, the sheds and the attic. I found an empty jam jar and an empty box of shoe polish. Shurik found an old door pull and a big galosh. Then we nearly had a fight over a fishing-rod in the attic. I saw it first and shouted,

"That's mine!"

Then Shurik saw it and he shouted,

"It's mine!"

I grabbed one end, he grabbed the other and we pulled. I got so mad I yanked it hard and he tumbled over. Then he said,

"Who needs your old rod? I have my galosh."

"You can kiss your lovely galosh, but don't you dare touch my rod again."

I found a spade in the shed and went off to dig worms, for I had decided to go fishing. Shurik went to ask Grandma for some matches.

"What do you want them for?" she demanded.

"I want to make a fire in the yard. Then I'll put the galosh on top of the fire and when it melts it'll be rubber."

"What will you think of next! Why, you'll burn the house down if I don't keep an eye on you. No, my dear, don't even ask me for them. Children should never play with matches. Imagine such mischief!"

So Shurik tied one end of a piece of string to the door pull and the other to his galosh. He marched up and down the yard, dragging the galosh along.

When he came over to me and saw me digging for worms he said,

"You're wasting your time. You won't catch anything anyway."

"Why not?"

"I'll put a spell on the fish."

"Don't scare me," I said.

I dug some worms, put them in a box and went off to the pond.

The pond was behind the house, where the collective-farm's gardens began. I put a worm on my hook, cast my line and sat down to wait for a bite. Shurik crept up and began yelling at the top of his voice:

*Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make
my bread!*

I decided not to say anything, because I knew that if I did, it would only make him shout louder. He finally got tired of shouting his evil spell, tossed his galosh into the water, and sailed it around on the surface by the string. Then he thought up something else: he threw the galosh into the pond, chucked stones at it until it sank, then pulled it up again.

For a moment or two I didn't say a word. Then I hollered, "Get out of here! You've scared all my fish away!"

"You won't catch anything anyway. I put a spell on them," he yelled.

And he tossed his galosh into the middle of the pond!

I jumped up and grabbed a stick. Shurik ran off, with the galosh dancing along crazily behind him. He was lucky I didn't catch him.

I went back to the pond and sat down to fish again.

The sun was high overhead by then and I still hadn't had a single bite. What was wrong with those fish? I was so mad at Shurik I could have beat his brains out. I didn't believe in his spell, but I knew that if I came home empty-handed he'd laugh at me. I tried everything: casting far into the pond and close to the bank, sinking my hook deeper into the water, but nothing helped. I began to feel hungry and went home.

There was a great hammering at our gate.

When I got closer I saw it was Shurik. He had got hold of a hammer and some nails and was hammering the door pull to the gate.

"Why are you nailing this here?"

He grinned when he saw me.

"Ah, the fisherman's back! Where's your catch?" he asked and giggled.

"Why are you nailing this to the gate? There is a handle here."

"So what? Now there'll be two. In case one comes off."

When he was all through hammering he had one nail left. He couldn't decide what to do with it. At first, he just wanted to drive it into the gate. Then he got a better idea. He held his galosh to the gate with the sole against the wood and nailed it there.

"What's that for?"

"Nothing special."

"That's stupid."

Then we saw Grandpa coming home for lunch. Shurik was scared. He tried to pull the galosh off the gate, but it was nailed



fast. Then he stood in front of it, to hide it from view. Grandpa came up to us and said,

"Good for you, boys! You've got down to work your very first day. Whose idea was it to nail another handle to the gate?"

"Shurik's," I said.

Grandpa cleared his throat.

"Well, now we'll have two handles on the gate, one higher up, the other lower down, so that when a very short person comes calling he can pull the bottom one." Then he noticed the galosh.

"What's this?"

I snorted, knowing that Shurik was in for it. Shurik turned red. He didn't know what to say.

"What's this, a mailbox?" Grandpa asked. "If the mailman comes round and sees nobody's home he can put our letters in the galosh. That's a very clever idea."

"I thought of it myself."

"Indeed?"

"Honest!"

"Good for you."

All during lunch Grandpa kept telling Grandma what a smart fellow Shurik was. "It's really amazing. We'd never have thought of it. Imagine, he nailed a galosh to the gate! I've been saying we needed a mailbox, but never got around to it."

"I can take a hint. I'll get us a mailbox," Grandma said. "Meanwhile, the galosh can serve as one."

After lunch Shurik ran off to the orchard. Grandpa said to me,

"Shurik has really been busy this morning. I'm sure you were up to something, too, Kolya. You might as well confess and make your Grandpa happy."

"I went fishing, but I didn't catch anything."

"Where'd you go?"

"To the pond."

"No wonder. They've just dug it. I don't even think there are

frogs in it yet. I'll tell you what. You go down to the river. The current is fast under the wooden bridge. That's where you fish."

Grandpa went back to work, I got my rod and said to Shurik, "Let's go down to the river to fish."

"You're trying to make up to me, aren't you?"

"What for?"

"So I won't put any more spells on the fish."

"I couldn't care less."

I took my box of worms and the empty jam jar for my fish and set off. Shurik tagged along behind. When we got to the river I found a good spot near the bridge and cast my line.

Shurik stayed close to me, mumbling,

*Be he alive, or be he dead,
I'll grind his bones to make
my bread!*

He'd be still for a few moments and then start it again,

Be he alive, or be he dead...

Suddenly, I had a bite. I yanked at the line. The fish glittered in the air, slipped off the hook and fell wriggling onto the grass.

"Catch it!" Shurik yelled and threw himself on the fish.

It slipped away and was thrashing about at the water's edge. Shurik finally got hold of it. I filled the jar with water and he dropped the fish in.

"It's a perch," he said as he examined it. "I'm sure it is. See the stripes on it? Can it be mine?"

"All right. We'll catch a lot more."

We fished for hours that day and caught six little perch, four gudgeons and one small ruff. On the way home Shurik carried the jar of fish. He wouldn't let me hold it. He was so proud he never minded his galosh missing from the gate. There was a shiny blue mailbox in its place.

“Who cares?” he said. “And anyway, the mailbox is nicer.”

Then he ran off to show Grandma the fish. She was very pleased.

After a while I said to Shurik, “See, your magic spell didn’t work. It’s not worth much, is it? And I don’t believe in it.”

“I don’t, either. You have to be real dumb to believe in magic. Or very old.”

This made Grandma laugh, because she was very old, but she didn’t believe in magic spells, either.



The Lollipop

As Mummy was leaving the house, she said to Misha:

"I'm going out, Mishenka, so you behave yourself. Don't get up to any tricks while I'm away and don't touch anything. I'll give you a big red lollipop if you're good."

Mummy went out. At first Misha behaved like a good boy: he didn't get up to any tricks or touch anything. Then he put a chair next to the sideboard, climbed on it and opened the door. He stood there looking into the sideboard and thought:

"I'm not touching anything, only looking."

There was a sugar bowl in the sideboard. He took it and put it on the table.

"I'll just have a look inside. I won't touch anything," he thought.

He took off the lid and saw something red inside.

"It's a lollipop!" Misha said. "It must be the one Mummy promised me."

He put his hand into the sugar bowl and pulled out the lollipop.

"What a big one!" he said. "I bet it tastes nice."

Misha licked it.

"I'll just have a little lick, then put it back," he thought.

Then he began to suck it. He kept sucking and looking to see how much was left. There seemed to be quite a lot. But slowly the lollipop shrank to the size of a match. Misha put it back in the sugar bowl. He stood there, licking his fingers and looking at the lollipop.

"I might as well finish it," he thought. "Mummy will give it to me in any case. I'm behaving myself and not doing anything wrong."

So Misha took out the lollipop and popped it in his mouth. He picked up the sugar bowl to put it back, but it stuck to his fingers and fell to the floor with a crash, breaking in two. The sugar fell out on the floor.

Misha was frightened.

"What will Mummy say now?"

He took the two pieces and propped them up against each other. They stayed put. You couldn't even tell the sugar bowl was broken. Then he put the lumps of sugar back, put on the lid and stood the bowl carefully in the sideboard.

At last Mummy came home.

"Well, have you behaved yourself?"

"Yes, Mum."

"There's a good boy. Now I'll give you your lollipop."

Mummy opened the sideboard and picked up the sugar bowl. Goodness me! It fell to pieces in her hands and the sugar fell out all over the floor.

"What's this? Who broke the sugar bowl?"

"Not me. It broke itself..."

"Oh, it broke itself, did it? I see. And what happened to the lollipop?"

"The lollipop... Well, I ate it. I'd been a good boy, so I ate it all up. See..."



The Crucian Carp

Vitalik's mother made him a present of a crucian carp and a small aquarium for it to live in. It was a beautiful little fish and Vitalik was very excited about it at first — he fed it and changed the water in the bowl regularly. But after a time he lost interest in it and even forgot to feed it sometimes.

Vitalik had a kitten, too, called Murzik, a grey fluffy kitten with large green eyes. Murzik loved to watch the fish swimming about in its bowl. He could sit for hours beside the bowl with his eyes glued to the carp.

"You'd better keep an eye on Murzik," Vitalik's mother warned him. "He'll eat up your fish one of these days."

"No, he won't," said Vitalik. "I'll see he doesn't."

One day when his mother was out, Vitalik's friend Seryozha came to see him. When he saw the fish he said:

"That's a nice little carp you've got there. I'll give you a whistle for it if you like."

"What do I need a whistle for?" said Vitalik. "I think a fish is much better than a whistle."

"No, it isn't. You can blow on a whistle, but what can you do with a fish?"

"You can watch it swimming in its bowl. And that's more fun than blowing a whistle."

"Rats," said Seryozha. "Besides, the cat can gobble up your fish any time and then you won't have a whistle or a fish either. But the cat won't eat a whistle, because it's made of iron."

"Mummy doesn't like me to swap things. She'll buy me a whistle if I want one."

"She'd never get one like this," said Seryozha. "You can't buy them in the shops. This is a real policeman's whistle. When I go outside in our yard and whistle everyone thinks it's the police."

Seryozha took a whistle out of his pocket and blew a piercing blast on it.

"Let me have a try," begged Vitalik.

He took the whistle and blew on it. It responded with a loud trill. Vitalik was enchanted. He longed to own the whistle but at the same time he didn't want to part with his fish.

"Where would you put the fish if I swapped with you? You haven't got an aquarium."

"I'd put it in a jam jar. We have a big one at home."

"All right, take it," said Vitalik, finally giving in.

They had a hard time taking the fish out of the bowl. It kept slipping out of their hands. At last, after splashing water all over the floor, Seryozha managed to catch it, wetting his sleeves up to the elbow in the process.

"I've got him!" he shouted. "Quick, bring me a glass of water."

Vitalik brought a mug full of water and Seryozha dropped the fish into it. Then the two friends went to Seryozha's place. The jam jar turned out to be not quite so big as Seryozha had said, and the fish had much less room than in its

bowl. The boys stood watching it swimming back and forth in the jar. Seryozha was very pleased but Vitalik felt a little sad. He was sorry he had given away his fish, and what is most important, he was afraid to tell his mother that he had exchanged it for a whistle.

"Perhaps she won't notice that it's gone," he thought as he walked home.

But as soon as he came home his mother asked him:

"Where is your fish?"

Vitalik did not know what to say.

"Did Murzik eat it up?"

"I don't know," Vitalik mumbled.

"There you are," said his mother. "He waited until everybody was out, fished it out of the bowl and gobbled it up. The wicked cat! Where is he? Find him at once."

"Murzik! Murzik!" Vitalik called, but Murzik was nowhere to be seen.

"He must have jumped out through the window," said his mother. "Go outside and have a look."

Vitalik put on his coat and went outside.

"Oh dear, what shall I do?" he thought miserably. "Now Murzik will get a hiding because of me."

He was just about to go back and say he couldn't find Murzik, when Murzik himself sprang out of a hole and ran over to the door.

"Murzik darling, don't go home," said Vitalik. "You'll get a hiding from Mummy."

Murzik purred and rubbed himself against Vitalik's leg and miaowed softly.

"Don't you understand, you silly cat?" said Vitalik. "You mustn't go in."

But Murzik wouldn't listen. He looked up adoringly at Vitalik, rubbing himself against his legs and pushing at him gently

with his head as if begging him to hurry up and open the door. Vitalik tried to drag him away from the door, but Murzik wouldn't go. Vitalik opened the door quickly, slipped inside and closed it before Murzik had time to follow him.

"Miaow!" cried Murzik from the other side of the door.

Vitalik went out again. "Keep quiet, you silly. Mummy will hear and you'll get beaten!"

He grabbed the cat and started pushing him back into the hole under the house. Murzik resisted with all four paws. He didn't want to go back into the basement.

"Get in, silly," muttered Vitalik. "And stay there."

At last he managed to push the kitten through the hole, all except his tail which still stuck out. The tail wiggled angrily for a little, then disappeared inside. Vitalik was glad: he thought Murzik understood that he must sit tight in the cellar. But the next minute Murzik stuck his head out of the hole again.

"Where are you going, stupid!" hissed Vitalik, covering the opening with his hands. "Didn't I tell you you can't go home just now."

"Miaow!" cried Murzik.

"Miaow yourself," snapped Vitalik. "Oh dear, what shall I do with you?"

He looked around for something to cover the hole with. There was a brick lying on the ground near the cellar. Vitalik picked it up and stood it up against the hole.

"There," he said. "Now you can't get out. You stay there for a while. Tomorrow Mummy will forget all about the fish and then I'll let you out."

Vitalik went back into the house and told his mother he couldn't find Murzik anywhere.

"Never mind," said Mummy. "He'll come back. I shan't forgive him for this."

At dinner that day Vitalik felt very miserable. He didn't want to eat anything.

"Here I am having dinner," he thought, "and poor Murzik is sitting there in the dark cellar."

When his mother left the table, Vitalik took his portion of meat from his plate, hid it in his pocket and ran out to the cellar. He moved the brick aside and called softly: "Murzik! Murzik!"

But Murzik didn't answer. Vitalik bent down and peeped through the hole, but it was too dark to see anything.

"Murzik! Murzik!" Vitalik called. "Do come out, there's a good cat. I've got a nice bit of meat for you."

But Murzik did not appear.

"You won't? All right, you can stay there hungry," said Vitalik and went home in a huff.

At home he felt very lonely without Murzik. Besides, his heart was heavy because he had deceived his mother.

His mother saw that he looked unhappy.

"Cheer up," she said. "I'll get you another fish."

"I don't want a fish," he said.

He wanted to own up to his mother about everything but he hadn't the courage, so he said nothing. Just then there was a faint scratching noise outside the window, followed by loud "Miaow!"

Vitalik looked up and saw Murzik standing on the windowledge. How had he got out of the cellar?

"Aha!" cried Vitalik's mother. "There he is, the rascal! Come here, you bad cat!"

She opened the little window and Murzik came in. She tried to grab him, but he must have guessed that something was wrong because he darted under the table.

"Oh, the cunning little beast," said Vitalik's mother. "He knows he's guilty. Vitalik, help me catch him."

Vitalik crawled under the table. When Murzik saw him he fled for cover under the sofa. Vitalik was glad, and though

he dutifully crawled after him, he made as much noise as he could so as to give Murzik a chance to escape. Murzik sprang out from under the sofa and Vitalik started chasing him round and round the room.

"Don't make such a noise," said his mother. "You'll never catch him that way."

Murzik jumped on to the window-sill where the empty fish bowl stood and was about to jump back through the window but missed his footing and fell into the fish bowl with a great splash! The next moment he was out, shaking himself furiously. Mother seized him by the scruff of the neck.

"Now, I'll teach you a good lesson."

"Mummy, Mummy! Please don't beat him!" cried Vitalik and burst into tears.

"Now, don't go pitying him. He didn't pity the fish, did he?"

"He isn't to blame, Mummy."

"Oh, isn't he? Who ate the fish, then?"

"It wasn't him."

"Then who was it?"

"It was me..."

"What? You ate the fish?"

"No, I didn't eat it. I ... I exchanged it for a whistle."

"For a what?"

"For this." And Vitalik pulled the whistle out of his pocket and showed it to his mother.

"You naughty boy, you ought to be ashamed of yourself!"

"I didn't mean it, Mummy. Seryozha said: 'Let's swap,' so I did."

"I meant you ought to be ashamed of yourself for not telling the truth. I blamed it on Murzik. Is it nice to shift the blame on others?"

"I was afraid you would scold me."



“Only cowards are afraid to tell the truth. How would you have felt if I had punished Murzik?”

“I’ll never do it again.”

“Well, mind you don’t. I forgive you this time because you owned up.”

Vitalik picked up Murzik and took him over to the radiator to dry. With his wet fur sticking up all over Murzik looked more like a hedgehog than a cat. He looked skinny too, as if he hadn’t eaten for a whole week. Vitalik took the piece of meat out of his pocket and laid it in front of Murzik. Murzik ate it up with great zest and climbed on to Vitalik’s lap, curled up in a ball and began to purr as loudly as he could. The sound of his purring made Vitalik somehow feel very happy. It must have been the purring because what else could it be?



The Mischief-Makers

Me and Valya are mischief-makers. We're always getting up to some tricks.

One day we read the story of *The Three Pigs*. Then we started playing it. First we ran round the room, jumping and shouting:

"Who's afraid of the big bad wolf!"

Then Mummy went shopping, and Valya said:

"Let's make a little house for ourselves, Petya, like the three pigs in the story."

We pulled a blanket off the bed and hung it over the table. It made a nice little house. We crawled inside. It was pitch dark.

"What fun it is having our own house!" said Valya. "We'll live here all the time and not let anyone in. And if the big bad wolf comes, we'll chase him away."

"It's a pity there aren't any windows," I said. "It's very dark."

"Never mind," said Valya. "The three pigs' houses didn't have windows either."

"Can you see me?" I asked.

"No. Can you see me?"

"No," I said. "I can't even see myself."

Suddenly something grabbed hold of my leg. I gave a great yell and rushed out from under the table, with Valya hot on my heels.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Someone grabbed hold of my leg," I said. "Perhaps it was the big bad wolf!"

Valya got scared and ran out of the room. I followed her.

We rushed into the corridor and slammed the door.

"Let's hold the door, so he can't open it," I said.

We stood there holding it for ages.

"Perhaps there's no one in there," said Valya.

"Then who grabbed my foot?" I asked.

"It was me," said Valya. "I wanted to find out where you were."

"Why didn't you say so before?"

"I got scared," she said. "You scared me."

We opened the door. There was no one in the room. But we were still afraid to go up to the table. Say the big bad wolf was under it and suddenly jumped out.

"You go and take the blanket off," I said.

"No, you go," said Valya.

"There's no one under there," I said.

"You never know!"

I tiptoed up to the table, pulled the edge of the blanket and rushed to the door. The blanket fell off. There was no one under the table. We were so pleased that we wanted to mend the little

house. But then Valya said:

“What if someone grabs your leg again!”

So we didn't play at being the three pigs anymore.



The Patch

Bobka had a really super pair of trousers: khaki or, rather, a sort of camouflage colour. Bobka was very fond of them and always boasting about them:

"Hey, boys, take a look at my trousers. Real soldier-style."

Of course, they were the envy of all his friends. Nobody had khaki trousers like them.

One day Bobka was climbing over a fence when he got caught on a nail and ripped his beloved trousers. In his anger he all but burst into tears, and raced home to ask his mother to mend them. Mother was very cross.

"If you go clambering over fences and tear your trousers, do you expect me to do the darning every time?"

"I won't do it again," said Bobka. "Please, Mum."

"Darn them yourself," said his mother.

"But I don't know how," he complained.

"You tore them, you mend them," she said.

"All right then," burst out Bobka. "I shall walk about like this."

And he went out into the yard. His friends at once saw the hole in his trousers and began to laugh.

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"A fine soldier you make," they called, "with a hole in your pants."

Bobka tried to explain,

"I asked my Mum to darn them, but she wouldn't."

"We didn't know soldiers' mothers have to mend their trousers," some of the lads teased him. "A soldier should be able to do everything himself: and that means sewing on a patch or a button too."

Bobka's face fell. He went home, asked his Mother for a needle and cotton and a piece of khaki material. Out of the khaki cloth he cut a patch about the size of a cucumber and started to sew it to his trousers. It was no easy job. Bobka was in too much of a hurry and kept pricking his fingers.

"What do you prick me for? You stupid needle!" he kept moaning to the needle. And he tried to hold it by the very end so that it did not prick him.

At long last the patch was sewn on. It stuck out of his trousers like a shrivelled mushroom, and the cloth around it was all wrinkled, making one leg shorter than the other.

"That won't do at all," Bobka spluttered as he inspected his trousers. "That's even worse than it was before. I shall have to do it all over again."

So he took a knife and started to unpick his stitches; then, righting the patch, he set to work once more, first drawing a pencil line right round the patch very neatly. This time he did not hurry, he sewed carefully all the time making sure that the patch had not overstepped his line.

It took him ages to do the job, he moaned and groaned, yet when it was over it was a real treat to look at. It was sewn on perfectly, smoothly and so firmly that you couldn't tear it off with your teeth.

At last Bobka pulled on his trousers and went out into the yard. His friends clustered round.

“That’s super,” they said. “Just look at that, the patch is traced in pencil; anyone can see you’ve sewn it on yourself. You’re a marvel.”

Bobka did a couple of turns so that everyone could see clearly.

“I should learn to sew on buttons as well,” he sighed. “What a pity none came off. Never mind, sooner or later they’ll get torn off and then I’ll certainly sew them on myself.”



And I'm Helping Too

There once lived a little girl named Ninochka. She was five years old. She lived with her father, mother and old Grannie.

Ninochka's mother left for work every day, so the little girl stayed home with Grannie. And it was she who taught Ninochka to dress and wash herself, do up her buttons, tie the laces of her shoes, plait her hair in little pigtails and even write the letters of the alphabet.

Ninochka spent all day with Grannie, only seeing her mother in early morning and evening. She saw her father very rarely, for he worked in the remote Arctic; he was a Polar pilot and only came home in the holidays.

Once a week, and sometimes even sooner, a letter would come from Ninochka's father. When Mother returned from work she would read the letter out while Ninochka and Grannie listened. And then they would all sit down to write Father a reply. Next day Mother would go off to work, and Grannie and Ninochka would take the letter to the post.

One day Ninochka and Grannie were going to post Father's letter; the weather was fine and sunny. Ninochka was wearing a lovely blue dress and white apron with a little red rabbit sewn on it. On their way back from the post Grannie took Ninochka by a short cut home over some wasteland. There used to be some small wooden cottages on that land, but now all the people had been rehoused in a big new block of flats; it was decided to plant trees and make a park here. At the moment, though, there was still no park, and in the corner lay a pile of old iron which workmen had forgotten to cart away: there were bits of old iron tubing, pieces of a radiator and a tangle of iron wiring.

Grannie even stopped by the pile of iron and said,

"And those girls and boys from the Young Pioneers don't know where to find old iron. Someone ought to tell them."

"What do Pioneers want iron for?" asked Ninochka.

"Well, they're always running in and out of the yards collecting waste iron to give to the state."

"Why the state?"

"The state sends it to a factory. At the factory they melt it down and make new things for people from it."

"Then who makes the Pioneers collect scrap?" asked Ninochka.

"No one makes them. They do it themselves. After all, children ought to help grown-ups."

"And did my Daddy help grown-ups when he was small?"

"He did."

"How about me, Grannie dear, why don't I help grown-ups?"

"So you will give a hand when you're just a teeny bit bigger," said Grannie with a smile.

Several days passed and Grannie had clean forgotten all about the conversation. But Ninochka never forgot anything. One day she was playing in the yard; Grannie had let her out all by herself. The children were not yet back from school so there wasn't a soul in the yard and Ninochka got bored.

All of a sudden she saw two unfamiliar boys come running through the yard gates. One of them was in long trousers and a navy blue reefing-jacket; the other wore a brown suit with short trousers; the boots on his feet were not black, they were some sort of muddy colour because he was always forgetting to clean them.

Neither boy paid any attention to Ninochka. They began to run around the yard peering into all the corners as if they were looking for something. Finally they came to a halt in the middle of the yard and the one in long trousers said,

"See, I told you so, nothing."

And the one in muddy boots wiped his nose, pushed his cap back and said: "Let's go and look in other yards, Valerik. We'll find some somewhere."

"You bet!" Valerik snorted.

They turned back towards the gates.

"Boys!" Ninochka called after them.

The lads stopped by the gates.

"What do you want?"

"What are you looking for?"

"What's it to do with you?"

"You're probably after scrap-iron?"

"Well, what if we are? What's it to you?"

"I know where there's a lot of iron."

"How do you know?"

"I know so."

"You don't know anything."

"Oh yes, I do."

"All right, then, show us where your iron is."

"It's not here. You have to go out on the street, then turn round there, then make another turning over there, then across another yard, then ... then..."

"You're fibbing, I can see," said Valerik.

"I never tell fibs. Just you follow me," answered Ninochka and she marched boldly out through the gates.

The lads exchanged glances and chuckled.

"Shall we go, Andrei?" Valerik asked his mate.

"Might as well," said Andrei with a shrug of his shoulders.

The lads caught up with Ninochka and fell in behind her. They tried to make as if they weren't actually with her, but were ambling along separately, by themselves. Their faces bore a sardonic expression.

"Flouncing along like a grown-up," said Valerik.

"She'll lose her way," replied Andrei. "And then she'll be a nuisance. We'll have to take her all the way back home."

Ninochka reached the corner of the street and turned left. The lads obediently hurried after her. At the next corner she stopped, stood for a moment uncertainly, then boldly stepped out across the road. The boys, as if in follow-my-leader, filed after her. "Listen," Valerik shouted to Ninochka, "is there much iron there? Maybe it's only an old broken poker?"

"There's a lot," answered Ninochka. "The pair of you won't be able to carry it all."

"Fibber!" said Valerik. "The two of us can carry as much as we want. We're strong."

At that moment Ninochka stopped at the gates. She looked at them very carefully and went into the yard. The lads followed in her steps. They came to the end of the yard, then turned back towards the gates and once again came out onto the street.

"What are you up to?" asked Valerik suspiciously.

"It's not that yard," said Ninochka in confusion. "I was wrong. We need the short-cut one, and this isn't the short cut. It's the next one, I suppose."

They entered the neighbouring yard, but that too was not the one. The same disappointment awaited them in the next yard as well.

"Now what, are we going to traipse around all the yards in town?" said Andrei crossly.

At last the fourth yard turned out to be the one they wanted. The children walked across it into a narrow lane, then turned onto a wide street and went down it. After a block, Ninochka stopped, looked to all sides and said,

"I think we've come the wrong way."

"Well, let's go the other way since this isn't it. There's no sense standing here," mumbled Andrei.

They turned back and went in the other direction; they passed the lane and once more walked a whole block.

"Now where: right or left?" asked Valerik.

"Right," answered Ninochka. "Or left..."

"Oh heck!" said Andrei. "You're quite useless, aren't you?"

Ninochka began to cry.

"I've lost my way."

"You silly girl," said Valerik reproachfully. "All right, come on, we'll take you home, otherwise you'll be saying we led you astray and abandoned you in the middle of the street."

Valerik took Ninochka's hand and all three of them turned back. Andrei walked behind muttering to himself,

"All that time wasted on that stupid article. Without her we'd have found lots of iron by now."

Now they were back in the yard they had first come through for the short cut. Valerik was about to go through the gates when Ninochka stopped him and said,

"Stop, stop! I remember now. We must go that way."

"Now which is 'that way'?" asked Andrei sarcastically.

"Over there. Through that other yard opposite. I remember now. Grannie and I passed through two yards. First this one, then that one."

"You're not tricking us, are you?" asked Valerik.

"No, I don't think so this time."

"You'd better watch out, if we don't find any iron there, we'll tan your hide for you," said Andrei.

"What's a hide?" asked Ninochka.

"You'll find out soon enough," he said. "Come on."

The children crossed over to the other side of the lane, walked through the yard and ended up on the wasteland.

"Here it is, here's the scrap-iron!" exclaimed Ninochka.

Andrei and Valerik raced each other to the pile of scrap-iron. Ninochka scampered after them, shouting joyfully,

"See, see, I told you so! I told the truth, didn't I?"

"Good lass," said Valerik. "You told the truth all right. What's your name?"

"Ninochka. And you?"

"I'm Valerik, he's Andrukha."

"You shouldn't say Andrukha, you should say Andrei," said Ninochka correcting him.

"Oh, he doesn't mind," said Valerik with a wave of his hand.

The lads set about sorting through the rusty pipes and pieces of radiator. The scrap was half covered with earth, so it wasn't that easy to dig it out.

"You're right, there's a lot of scrap here," said Valerik. "How are we going to carry it all?"

"We could bind two pipes together with wire and make a carrier," suggested Andrei.

So the two lads began to make the carrier. Andrei worked hard and kept wiping his nose with the back of his fist.

"You shouldn't wipe your nose like that, Andrei," said Ninochka primly.

"So what? And why not?"

"Grannie says not."

"A fat lot she knows, your Grannie."

"She knows everything because she is the oldest. Here, take this handkerchief instead."

Ninotchka took from her pocket a neatly-folded snow-white handkerchief. Andrei took it, stared at it in silence for a moment, then handed it back.

"Take it, or my nose'll spoil it for you."

He took out of his pocket a handkerchief; certainly, it was not so snow-white as Ninotchka's. And he had a good blow.

"You see how much better that is," said Ninotchka.

"What's better about it!" answered Andrei and made such a face that Ninotchka couldn't help laughing.

When the carrier was ready, the children loaded the scrap on it, and just one thick twisted pipe wouldn't fit on.

"Never mind, maybe we will pick it up later on," said Valerik.

"Why later?" asked Ninotchka. "I'll give you a hand."

"Fair enough," agreed Andrei. "Come to our school with us, it isn't far. And then we'll take you home."

The lads picked up the carrier and carted the iron to school; in the meantime Ninotchka hoisted the twisted pipe onto her shoulder and trailed along behind the boys.

...A whole hour had passed since Grannie had let Ninotchka out to play.

"I wonder what my little wiggle-worm is up to all that time in the yard," she asked herself, as she suddenly realised that Ninotchka had not yet come home. "I hope she hasn't run off somewhere without me." The old woman flung a scarf over her shoulders and went out into the yard. The yard was now full of children, most of them playing tag.

"Children, have you seen my Ninotchka?" she asked.

But the children were so engrossed in their game that they didn't even hear the question. Just at that moment a young boy Vasya rushed past; he was all red from running, the hair on his head was matted and damp.

"You, Vasya, haven't you seen Ninotchka?"

"She's not here," said Vasya.

"What, not here?" said Grannie in surprise. "She came out to play over an hour ago."

"Well, she's not here," said a little girl Svetlana. "We've been playing for ages and we haven't seen her at all. Children," she shouted, "Ninotchka's lost!"

Everyone left off playing at once and crowded round the old woman.

"Perhaps she's gone outside into the street?" said Vasya.

Some of the children rushed into the street and turned back almost at once.

"She's not there," they said.

"She's probably gone to a neighbour," said someone. "You go and ask the neighbours, Grannie."

Grannie went round the neighbours' flats with the children all trailing behind her. After that they began to search in all the barns, clambering up the ladders into the lofts. They even climbed down into the cellar. Ninotchka was nowhere to be seen. Grannie followed behind them, muttering to herself,

"Oh, dear, Ninotchka. You'll be the end of me. Just you wait, I'll give it to you for scaring your Grannie like this!"

"Do you think she might have run into another yard?" said the children. "Let's go and see. You stay here, Grannie. As soon as we find her, we'll let you know straightaway. Go home and rest."

"How can I rest?" said Grannie in despair.

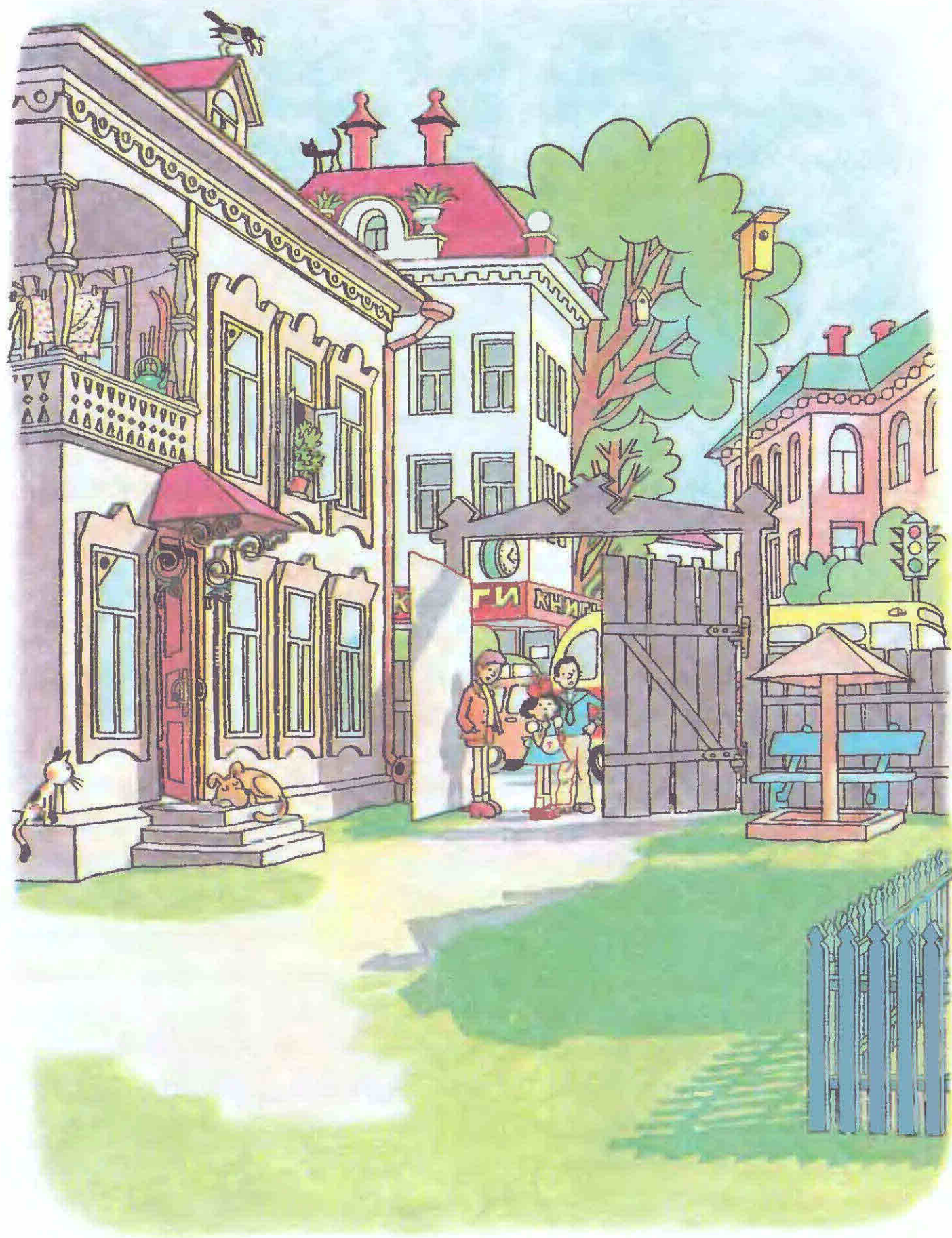
The old woman sighed sadly and turned back home. As soon as she closed the door a neighbour popped in and asked,

"Have they found Ninotchka yet?"

"No."

"You'd better report her missing to the police. She might even be there already."

"Yes, yes, you're right," said Grannie. "What an old silly I am, sitting here doing nothing."



And off she went. But she only got as far as the gates where she was met by the children.

"We've hunted in all the yards on this side of the street!" they shouted. "Now we'll try all along the other side. Don't you worry yourself, we'll find her."

"Carry on looking, dear children. And thank you," said the old woman. "Thank you very much. Oh dearie me, what an old fool I am... It's my fault. I won't punish her. I won't say a word to her ... if only they find her."

"Where are you off to, Grannie?" asked the children.

"To the police-station, children."

She moved off along the street searching every nook and cranny as she went. Finally she made it to the local police-station and sought out the children's room. The duty officer stood facing her.

"Sonny, you don't have my little girl here, do you?" she asked hopefully. "I've lost my granddaughter."

"We haven't had any lost children handed in today," replied the officer. "Now don't you worry, lady. Your little girl will turn up." He sat the old woman down on a chair and opened a big thick ledger lying on the desk.

"How old is your girl?" he asked and began writing. "What's her name? Where does she live?"

He wrote it all down: first name, surname, address. He even wrote that Ninochka was dressed in a light blue dress with a white apron which had a red rabbit on it. Then he asked whether there was a phone at home, and he noted down the number.

"So that's it, lady," he said at last. "Just you go home and don't fret. Your Ninochka may well be waiting for you at home right this minute. And if she isn't we'll find her soon enough."

The old woman had calmed down somewhat before she set out for home. But the nearer she got to the house, the more her

alarm grew. When she reached the gates, she halted. And Vasya came running up. The hair on his head was even more matted than before, and droplets of sweat glistened on his face.

"Ninotchka's Mummie's home," he announced with a scared look.

"And Ninotchka?"

"They haven't found her yet."

Grannie slumped against the fence; her knees went weak. She didn't know how to tell Ninotchka's mother about the loss. She was on the point of asking Vasya something else when suddenly she saw two boys coming along the pavement. They were hurrying down the street and between them, her little legs scurrying fast, was a young girl. Both boys held her by the hand, and now and again she would pull up her legs and hang by her hands; she was obviously having a good time. All three of them were laughing. When they came quite close, the old woman recognised the white apron with its red rabbit over the light blue dress.

"It's Ninotchka!" she shouted. "Thank Goodness!"

"Grannie!" cried Ninotchka rushing to her.

The old woman took Ninotchka in her arms and began to kiss her, while Andrei and Valerik stood there looking at them.

"Thank you, boys. Where did you find her?" she asked.

"Who?" asked Valerik bemused.

"Ninotchka of course."

"Oh, Ninotchka! Listen, Andrei, do you remember where we found Ninotchka?"

Andrei wiped his nose with the back of his hand, glanced around and said,

"Where? Well, it was here, wasn't it? In this very yard. We found her right here, before we went off for the scrap."

"Well, many thanks, lads. Thank you very much indeed," said the old woman.

She let Ninotchka down to the ground and, clutching her hand

tightly, she led her home. In the hallway they were met by Ninotchka's mother who was in the middle of putting on her hat. Her face was clearly troubled.

"What on earth's going on here?" she asked. "The police have just been on the phone asking whether Ninotchka's back or not. Where has she been?"

"Never mind, never mind," said Grannie soothingly. "Ninotchka got herself lost, and has been found again."

"Oh, no, Grannie, I didn't get lost at all," said Ninotchka. "I went to show the boys where the scrap was."

"What scrap are you talking about?"

And Ninotchka began to tell them about her adventures. Grannie only sighed as she heard the story.

"Well I never, what these children think of!" she said. "What they need scrap-iron for, goodness only knows."

"Well, Grannie," said Ninotchka, "you said yourself that children should help grown-ups. Daddy helped too when he was a boy. So I want to help as well."

"You did well to help the Pioneers," said Ninotchka's mother. "But you should have asked Grannie first. Grannie was worried."

"You aren't at all sorry for your Grannie," said the old woman shaking her head.

"I am sorry, Grannie," said Ninotchka. "I shall always ask in future. And you and I will find more scrap somewhere, won't we? A lot of scrap-iron."

For the rest of the day they heard nothing but talk of scrap-iron. And in the evening they all sat down round the table. Grannie and Mother wrote Father a letter. And Ninotchka drew a picture. She drew a little snow-covered Arctic cluster of dwellings on the bank of a frozen river. The inhabitants were gathered on a hill waiting for a plane which could be seen far off in the sky. It was bringing people the things they needed: sugar to one, flour to someone else, medicine for another, and toys for the

children. At the bottom Ninochka drew herself with a thick iron pipe in her hands and wrote in large capitals:

“AND I’M HELPING TOO.”

“That’s lovely,” said Grannie happily. “We’ll send this drawing in Daddy’s letter, and Daddy will know what a good little girl he’s got.”



The Policeman

More than anything in the world Alik was afraid of policemen. They always used policemen to frighten him at home. When he didn't do as he was told, they said:

"A policeman's coming to get you!"

And when he was naughty, they threatened:

"We'll take you off to the police-station."

One day Alik got lost. He didn't notice how it happened. He went out to play in the yard, ran into the street, then ran about until he didn't know where he was. He started to cry, of course. A crowd of people gathered round him.

"Where do you live?" they asked.

He didn't know.

Then someone said:

"We must take him to the police-station. They'll find his address there."

At the word police-station, Alik sobbed even louder.

Up came a policeman. He bent over Alik and asked:

"What's your name, my lad?"

Alik looked up, saw the policeman and took to his heels. He didn't get far before they caught him and held him tight so he couldn't run away again.

"I don't want to go to the police-station! I'd rather be lost!"

"But you can't be lost!" they said to him.

"Well, I'll find myself then somehow."

"How will you find yourself? You can't do that!"

Then the policeman came up again. Alik saw him and yelled so loudly that the policeman shrugged his shoulders, walked away and hid behind a corner.

"Don't shout," they said. "The policeman's gone away, see?"

"No, he hasn't. He's hiding behind that corner over there. I can see him."

"Try to find out his name, citizens," called the policeman. "Then I'll phone the police-station."

One of the women said to Alik:

"I know a little boy who never gets lost because he can remember his surname."

"I can remember my surname too," said Alik.

"What is it?"

"Kuznetsov. And my other names are Alexander Ivanovich."

"Oh, you are a clever lad!" the woman praised him. "I can see you know everything."

She went up to the policeman and told him Alik's surname. The policeman rang up the police-station, then came over and said:

"He lives not far from here. In Sandy Street. Who will help to take him home? He seems frightened of me for some reason."

"I'll take him. I think he's got used to me," said the woman who had found out Alik's surname.

She took Alik by the hand and led him home, with the policeman walking along behind them. Alik calmed down and stopped crying. But he kept looking round at the policeman and asking:

"Why is he following us?"

"Don't be afraid of him! He's just keeping law and order. You wouldn't tell him your name, but I did. He rang the police-station

and they found your address there in no time at all, because they have lists of everyone's surnames and addresses there."

Ever since then Alik has stopped being afraid of policemen. Now he knows they are just there to keep law and order.



Hide-and-Seek

Vitya and Slavik were neighbours. They were always popping in to see each other. One day Vitya came to see Slavik and Slavik said to him:

“Let’s play hide-and-seek!”

“Okay,” said Vitya. “Only bags I’m the first to hide.”

“Oh, alright then, I’ll try and find you,” said Slavik and went into the corridor.

Vitya ran into the room, crawled under the bed and shouted:

“Ready!”

Slavik came in, looked under the bed and found him straight-away. Vitya crawled out, complaining:

“That’s not fair! I didn’t hide properly! If I’d hidden properly you wouldn’t have found me. I’ll hide again.”

“Alright, hide again if you like,” Slavik agreed and went back into the corridor.

Vitya ran out into the yard looking for somewhere to hide. By the shed he saw the dog kennel with Bobik in it. He quickly chased Bobik out of the kennel, crawled inside and shouted:

“Ready!”

Slavik came into the yard and started looking for Vitya. But no matter how hard he looked, he couldn’t find him.

Then Vitya got fed up with being inside the kennel and began peeping out. Slavik saw him and cried:

“So that’s where you are! Out you come!”

Vitya crawled out of the kennel and said:

"That's not fair! You didn't find me. I looked out myself."

"Well, why did you look out?"

"I got tired of sitting all hunched up in the kennel. If I hadn't been hunched up you wouldn't have found me. I'll hide again."

"No, it's my turn to hide now," Slavik said.

"Then I won't play at all!" said Vitya huffily.

"Oh, alright then, hide again if you must," Slavik gave in.

Vitya ran into the room, shut the door, climbed behind the clothes stand and hid under a coat. Slavik set off to look for him again. As he opened the door, Bobik slipped in, padded over to the clothes stand and began nuzzling up to Vitya. Vitya kicked him away angrily.

Slavik saw this and shouted:

"So that's where you are! Behind the clothes stand! Out you come!"

Vitya crawled out and said:

"That's not fair! You didn't find me. It was Bobik who found me. I'll hide again!"

"No you won't," said Slavik. "You do all the hiding, and I have to look for you each time."

"Well, just look for me once more, then you can hide," said Vitya.

Slavik closed his eyes tight again, and Vitya ran into the kitchen, pulled all the china out of the cupboard, hid inside it and shouted:

"Ready!"

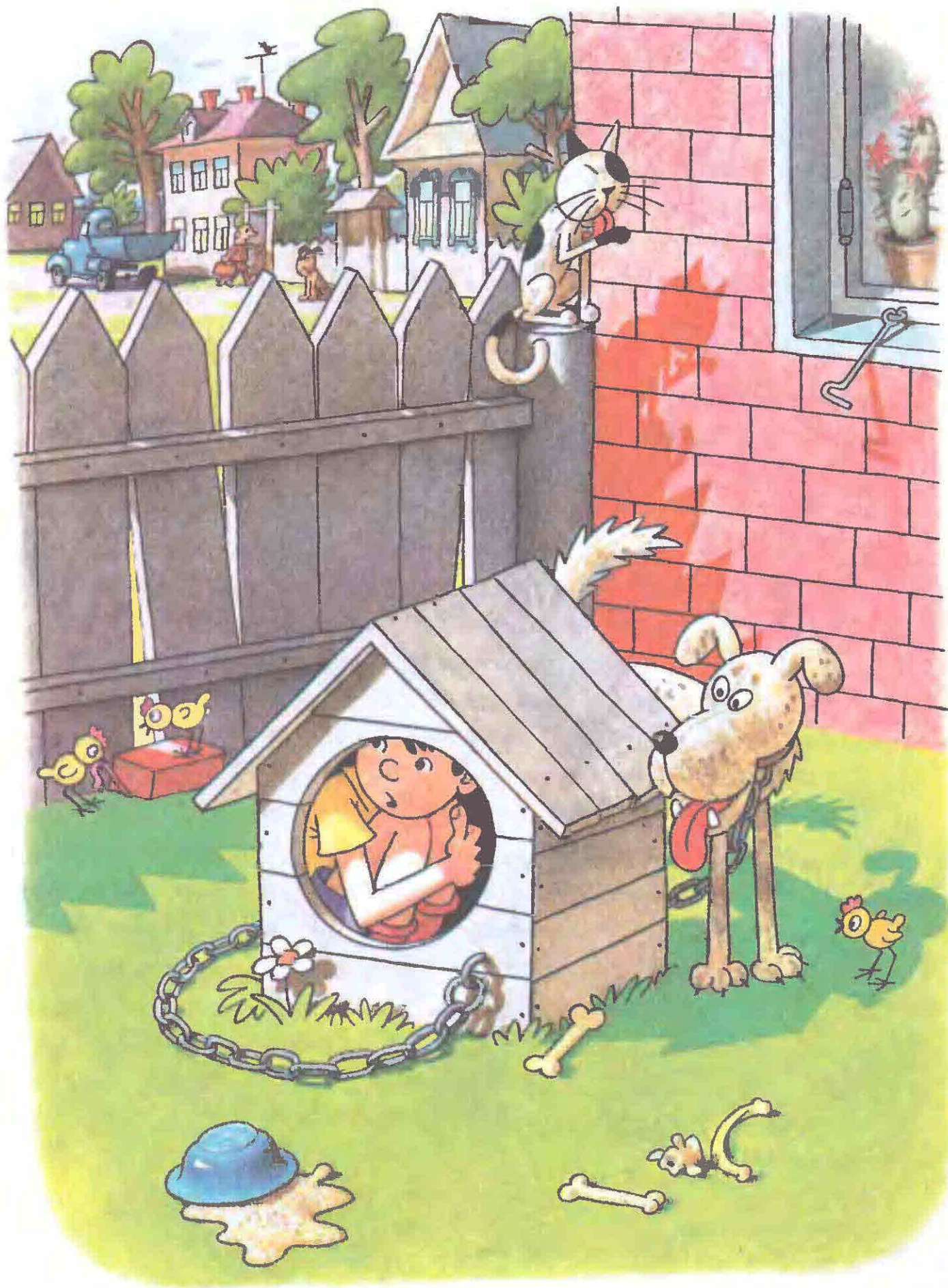
Slavik went into the kitchen, saw the china on the floor and immediately guessed where Vitya was. He crept quietly up to the cupboard, latched it, then ran into the yard and started playing hide-and-seek with Bobik. He hid and Bobik looked for him.

"This is great!" thought Slavik. "Bobik's much more fun to play with than Vitya."

After a while Vitya grew tired of sitting in the cupboard. He tried to get out, but the door wouldn't open.

Then he got scared and shouted:

"Slavik! Slavik!"



Slavik heard him and ran in.

"Let me out of here!" Vitya shouted. "The door won't open."

"I'll let you out if you'll look for me."

"Why should I look for you, if you didn't find me."

"But I did find you."

"It wasn't you who found me. I shouted out. If I hadn't shouted, you wouldn't have found me."

"Then you can stay in the cupboard, and I'll go and play," said Slavik.

"You mustn't do that!" Vitya shouted. "That's not a friendly thing to do."

"Well, is making me look for you all the time a friendly thing to do?"

"Yes, it is."

"Then you can stay in the cupboard all day."

"Alright, I'll look for you, only let me out," Vitya begged him.

Slavik unlatched. Vitya came out, saw the latch and said:

"So you locked me in on purpose? I'm not going to look for you!"

"Well, don't then," said Slavik. "I prefer playing with Bobik."

"But Bobik can't look for you, can he?"

"Oh, yes, he can. He's even better at it than you!"

"Then let's both hide from Bobik."

So Vitya and Slavik went into the yard and began to hide from Bobik. Bobik was good at playing hide-and-seek, only he couldn't keep his eyes closed tight.



Grandma Dina

It happened in nursery school just before the Eighth of March. One day when the boys and girls had just had their mid-morning snack and got ready to draw some flowers, their teacher Nina Ivanovna said:

“Now, children, who can tell me which holiday is coming very soon?”

“The Eighth of March! International Women’s Day!” shouted Sveta Kruglova, jumping out of her seat and hopping on one foot.

Sveta knew all the special days in the year by heart, because she always got a nice present on them. So she could even tick them off on her fingers: “New Year, Women’s Day, May Day, my birthday,” and so on until she got to the next New Year.

Of course, all the other children, both boys and girls, knew that it would soon be the Eighth of March and they shouted too:

“The Eighth of March! The Eighth of March! International Women’s Day!”

“Yes, yes, that’s enough!” said Nina Ivanovna, trying to calm them down. “I can see that you know everything. Now let’s think what we can do for our mothers for that day. I suggest making an exhibition. Each of you ask mummy for a photograph of her, then

we'll make frames for them and hang them on the wall. And that will be our exhibition."

"But we will learn some poems for the Eighth of March, won't we?" asked Tolya Shcheglov.

He was a clever little boy. He had been coming to nursery school ever since he was three and he knew that you had to learn a poem for a special day.

"Yes, we'll learn poems too. There's enough time for that. But we must get the photographs well in advance."

Nina Ivanovna was right about that. She knew that some of the mothers might not have a suitable photo and they would have to go and get one taken.

That was what happened to Natochka Kashina. That is, not to Natochka Kashina herself, but to her mummy. Natochka's mummy was actually not very happy about the whole thing.

"I always look awful on photographs," she said. "I haven't got a single good one."

Natochka's daddy kept laughing at her and saying that wasn't true. In the end her mummy got quite huffy with him. So he advised her to go and have her photograph taken, so she would have a nice new one.

That's just what Natochka's mummy did. She went and had her photo taken. But for some reason she liked the new one even less than the others and said she was much prettier on the old ones. So then Natochka's daddy said she should send an old photo to the nursery school.

Natochka's mummy agreed and gave Natochka the oldest photo she had. The photo itself looked as new as could be, but it had been taken a long time ago when Natochka's mummy was still very young and hadn't married Natochka's daddy yet.

The photographs were the subject of lively discussion in each family. Vladik Ogurtsov's mummy said she wasn't anyone special and hadn't set up any work records, so there was no reason to put

her photo up. But Vladik's daddy said it was International Women's Day and they were going to be in the nursery school exhibition not because they had set up work records, but because they were nice kind mothers who loved their children.

"We've got your photo on the wall in our room," Vladik's daddy said to her. "So why shouldn't the children put up pictures of their mothers for Women's Day? If I was director of the nursery school, I'd have pictures of all the mothers on the wall the whole year round, not just for special days."

Vladik's mother laughed and didn't object any more. In fact everything worked out fine. All the mothers sent a photograph. Then the children each drew some white daisies with long petals on a big piece of red cardboard, which made a nice frame. They stuck the photos on these frames, then hung them up in two rows on the wall, which made a lovely exhibition.

The children sat on their little chairs in a row admiring their exhibition. They were all pleased to see their mothers in it. And everything would have been fine, if Natochka hadn't suddenly said to Sveta who was sitting next to her:

"You know, Sveta, your mummy's very pretty, and my mummy's very pretty too, but my mummy is prettier than yours."

"Ha, ha!" said Sveta loudly, although she didn't feel like laughing at all after that. "If you want to know, my mummy is a million, or if you want to know, a whole hundred times prettier than yours. Let's ask Pavlik. You tell her, Pavlik."

Little Pavlik got up, took a good look at the mothers and said:

"Your mummy's pretty, and your mummy's pretty too, but my mummy's the prettiest."

"Silly thing!" said Natochka angrily. "I asked you who was prettiest, Sveta's mummy or mine! Who's the prettiest of those two. See?"

"Yes, I see. The prettiest of those two is my mummy."

"It's no use talking to him!" said Sveta, curling her lip contemp-

tuously. "Let's ask Tolik instead. Tell us whose mummy is prettiest, Tolik."

Tolik went up to the wall where the photographs were, pointed at his mummy and said:

"My mummy's the prettiest of all."

"What?" cried Natochka, Sveta and Pavlik too. "My mummy's the prettiest! My mummy! Mine!"

All three jumped up, ran to the photographs and began to point at their mother's photograph. Then all the other children rushed up too. There was a dreadful din. They kept sticking their fingers on their mother's photograph and shouting:

"My mummy's better! My mummy's prettier!"

Vladik tried to push Natochka out of the way, but she stuck her finger in her mother's face and pushed him back. Nina Ivanovna heard the commotion and ran in. She found out what the trouble was and told them all to sit down. But no one would leave the photographs, and they all kept shouting that their mummy was the prettiest.

Then Nina Ivanovna noticed a very little boy who was not shouting or squealing, but just sitting quietly on his chair watching the spectacle with a calm smile. It was Slavik Smirnov, who had just started nursery school. Nina Ivanovna praised him for not shouting and making a noise.

"You silly things! How can all your mothers be the prettiest? Look at Slavik. He's the smallest one here, but the cleverest too, because he's not shouting or squealing or sticking his finger on the photographs."

"That's because he's new and hasn't plucked up the courage yet," said dark-eyed Irochka.

"No, that's not why," Nina Ivanovna replied. "He knows that only one person can be the very, very prettiest. So let's ask Slavik to tell us which of the mothers is the prettiest, and we'll give her this lovely bunch of mimosa."

Then everyone saw that Nina Ivanovna was holding a big bunch of sweet-smelling mimosa. No one had noticed it before, because they had all been too busy arguing and looking at the photos.

"Yes, let's!" they all shouted. "Let's ask Slavik. He sat there quietly and didn't run up to his mother's photo. He'll tell the truth."

"Go and show us which mother is the prettiest, Slavik," said Nina Ivanovna.

Slavik walked slowly up to the photos and pointed to the photo of an old woman in a worn quilted jacket with an old faded scarf on her head.

"She's the prettiest," he said.

You should have heard the commotion! All the boys and girls shouted that it wasn't true. And some of them burst out laughing.

"There's nothing to laugh at," Slavik said. "It's just that she's wearing her old clothes here. Uncle Vassily took this photo of her at the factory in her working clothes. But when she puts on her nice party dress you'd hardly recognise her."

"He's saying his mum's the prettiest so that she'll get the bunch of flowers!" the boys shouted. "Don't give his mum the mimosa, Nina Ivanovna!"

"But that's not my mum!" exclaimed Slavik in surprise. "That's not my mum at all. It's Grandma Din. My mum's even prettier than Grandma Din."

"Who's Grandma Din?" cried the children.

"Well, she's really Grandma Dina," Slavik explained. "Only when I was little, I couldn't say 'Dina'. I just said 'Din'. And ever since then Grandma Dina has been Grandma Din. My mum and dad have gone to work in the north for two years, and I live with Grandma Din. She's very nice. She's kind and always plays with me. She even gives me toys. Now that I'm bigger and go to nursery school, Grandma Din has gone back to work at the factory, and when she gets paid she buys me a little present. I've got lots of toys now. I look after them, because they're from Grandma Din."

Then Nina Ivanovna said to the boys and girls, who were sitting quietly now:

"So you see, my little mice. Each of you thinks your mother is the prettiest, because each of you loves your mother. So for us the prettiest person is the one we love most of all. And it doesn't matter if they are old or young, a grown-up or a child."

"Well, who shall we give the flowers to, if they are all pretty?" asked Natchka.

Then Nina Ivanovna said:

"Let's give them to Grandma Din, because we said we would. Lots of mothers will come to our Eighth of March party, but only one grandmother. We'll give her the flowers because she is the oldest of all the mums. What do you think about that?"

Everyone agreed, and that was what they did. When the mothers came to the Eighth of March party, Grandma Din came too. And everyone saw that she was wearing her nice party dress. Her hair was white and her face very wrinkled, but her eyes were kind and loving.

Then all the children recited the poems they had learnt, and when they had finished they each gave their mother her photograph in a lovely frame with white daisies. And then Sveta presented the bunch of mimosa to Grandma Din. Nina Ivanovna said the children had decided to give her the flowers because she was the oldest.

Grandma Din thanked the children, but did not take the flowers home. Instead she gave each of them a sprig of mimosa and stroked them on the head. And when she stroked Sveta's head, Sveta felt that Grandma Din's hand was soft and loving, just like Sveta's mummy's. And Sveta wasn't at all sorry that her mother hadn't been given the flowers.

Then Vladik said:

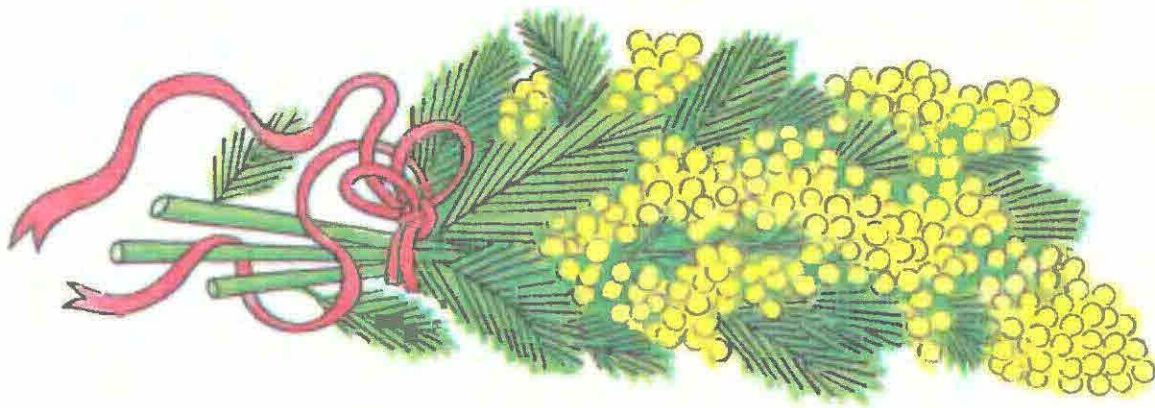
"My dad will be on the Kuril Islands next year, and when it's International Men's Day I'll bring a picture of my grandad for our exhibition. Then we'll give him a bunch of mimosa too."

“Don’t be silly!” Natchka said. “There’s only International Women’s Day, not International Mans’ Day.”

Nina Ivanovna corrected her:

“It’s ‘men’, not ‘mans’. No, there isn’t an International Men’s Day, but it doesn’t matter. We’ll organise one in our nursery school all the same, so our fathers and grandfathers don’t feel left out.”

Then all the mothers laughed happily. And most happily of all laughed Grandma Dina, who was happy because they had given her the bunch of mimosa.



A Tale About Twins

Spring had come. The sun was shining brightly in the sky. It was so warm outside that you didn't even need to wear a coat — just like summer. The new grass was beginning to come up. The young lime-trees in the street, which had been quite bare the day before, were now covered with tiny, delicate leaves. It was a delight to look at them! Pavlik came home from nursery school and said to his mother:

"Mum, our nursery school is going into the country soon! Olga Nikolayevna said so. Next week."

"That's nice," said his mother. "You'll have a good rest at the holiday home."

"But I'm not a bit tired," said Pavlik. "Why should I rest? I'd rather do something."

"Well, you can pick berries and mushrooms in the woods. And catch butterflies. Shall I get you a butterfly net?"

Pavlik thought for a moment.

"No, get me a spade for digging. I'll make a vegetable patch."

"Alright," said his mother and bought him a spade.

The next day Pavlik took the spade to nursery school and showed it to everyone.

"Look what a smashing spade I've got! I'm going to make a vegetable patch."

The children crowded round and began teasing him.

"You're too small to make a vegetable patch! Your vegetables won't grow."

"Oh, yes they will!" said Pavlik.

"No, they won't! No, they won't!"

They all began to shout like mad! There were lots of children and they made such a noise that Pavlik couldn't shout them down. He was so upset he almost cried.

"Don't cry," said the very smallest girl, Ninochka. "Shall we make the vegetable patch together? I'll help you, and the vegetables will grow big and juicy."

"Yes, of course they will," said Pavlik.

He calmed down and didn't argue with the other children any more.

That evening Grandma came to fetch him.

"Grandma, will my vegetables grow nice and big?" he asked her.

"Yes, of course."

"But what can I plant, Grandma? I haven't got any seeds."

"I'll buy you some."

"Buy them quickly, Grandma, because we're going away soon."

"I'll buy them tomorrow."

Next morning when Pavlik woke up Grandma said to him:

"Here are your seeds."

She gave him a small paper packet. Pavlik looked inside and saw some tiny grains.

"What sort of seeds are they?" he asked.

"Turnip seeds."

"Why are they so small?"

"That's the size turnip seeds are," said Grandma.

"Will a turnip grow from each seed?" asked Pavlik.

"Yes, it will."

"But how will it grow, Grandma?"

"It will just grow. You'll see."

Grandma told Pavlik how to dig up the soil and make a bed and how to plant the seeds. Pavlik listened carefully and understood everything. He took the seeds to nursery school and showed them to the other children.

"Look, everyone, I've got some turnips!"

"What turnips?" the children asked in surprise. "Turnips are big, but that looks like poppy seeds."

"They're not poppy seeds," said Pavlik. "They're turnip seeds, and turnips will grow from them."

"How will they grow?"

"I don't know."

"Well, keep quiet if you don't know," said the children and wouldn't listen to him.

The week simply flew past, and then the nursery school went off to the country holiday home. On the very first day, as soon as they arrived, Pavlik went up to Olga Nikolayevna and asked:

"Can I make a vegetable patch, Olga Nikolayevna? I've got some seeds."

"Yes, you can," said Olga Nikolayevna.

She showed Pavlik a suitable spot for a vegetable patch behind the house. Pavlik fetched his spade and began digging. The children ran up and watched. It was hard work digging up the firm soil. Pavlik kept at it, not wanting to give up halfway. Ninochka saw how tired he was and said:

"Let me dig for a bit, Pavlik. You're tired."

"Alright, you do a bit now," Pavlik agreed. "Then I'll do some more."

Ninochka took the spade and set to work.

Then the children who were watching wanted to have a go too.

"Please let us," they asked Pavlik.

"Alright," he said.

One by one the children did a bit of digging. They even started quarrelling about who should be first, but Pavlik said:

"I'll take the spade away, if you're going to quarrel."

So they shut up and began to dig quietly. The patch was ready by lunchtime. After lunch Pavlik raked it and began to plant the seeds.

"Let us have a go," the other children begged him.

"No, it's fun. I want to do it myself," Pavlik answered.

"Oh, go on. After all, we did some of the digging," said Tolya.

"I didn't make you."

"Go on, just one seed!"

Pavlik let him plant one seed. Then the other children wanted to as well. So he had to give them one seed each. But it didn't matter. There were so many seeds that some of them even planted two.

Next day they woke up early and rushed down to the vegetable patch to see if the seeds had come up. It was much too soon, of course.

"If we water the ground, the seeds will come up more quickly," said Nadya.

The children rushed up to Olga Nikolayevna, asked her for a watering can and began to water the vegetable patch. After that they watered it each morning, looking to see if the seeds were sprouting. But several days passed and there was no sign of them.

"What's the matter?" they wondered. "Maybe we planted the seeds upside down and they're growing downwards instead of upwards."

They stopped watering the vegetable patch.

"Perhaps we really did plant the seeds upside down?" Pavlik thought. "But how can you tell which way up to plant them? They're so small."

He watered the patch for another two days, then stopped too.

"Where are your big juicy turnips, eh?" said the children. "All that work was just a waste of time."

Pavlik stopped thinking about the vegetable patch. He played with the other children, picked berries in the woods, chased butterflies and made a little bird-house in the yard. After lunch and supper the children brought scraps of food to feed the birds who flew there from the woods.

One day as Pavlik was running past the vegetable patch, he saw some specks of green on it.

"Oh, dear," he said. "There's grass growing on our vegetable patch."

Then he noticed that the specks of green were in straight lines, as if someone had planted them like that.

"Our turnips are coming up!" he shouted.

The children came running up.

"Perhaps it's something else," they said.

"It's our turnips alright," Pavlik replied. "If Grandma said turnips, turnips it is."

The boys and girls began watering the vegetable patch again. The grass grew bigger and bigger until it turned into plants with big leaves.

Then suddenly it was time to go back to the town again.

"The turnips aren't ready to pick yet," thought Pavlik sadly.

He went to find Olga Nikolayevna and asked her:

"Who will stay here after we've gone?"

"Some children from another nursery school."

"Oh, that's alright then. When my turnips are ready, they can pick them."

It was quiet at the country house after they had gone. Only the birds fluttered round the bird-house, chirping loudly as if asking one another where the boys and girls were. Next day some children

from another nursery school arrived. They raced round the yard, peering into all the nooks and crannies.

"Look, a vegetable patch!" one of them shouted.

The others ran up. One of them pulled a few plants out of the ground. Zina, the oldest girl, came up and cried:

"Don't go treading on that vegetable patch! You ought to be ashamed of yourselves. Somebody planted it, and now you're trampling on it. You just put those plants back in the ground."

The children did as they were told. Zina had the bright idea of fencing off the patch. The children collected sticks and made a little fence round it. After that no one trampled on the vegetables.

The weather grew hot. The sun blazed down day after day, hotter and hotter. There was not a drop of rain for two weeks, not even a cloud in the sky. The vegetable patch was dry and parched. The plants began to wilt. Their leaves drooped and even began to turn yellow. One day Zina walked past them.

"Poor old plants," she said. "They're wilting. If it doesn't rain soon, they'll die."

She fetched a mug, filled it with water and began to water the vegetables.

The other children saw her and did some watering too, one with a kettle, one with a saucepan, and one just with a glass, until the vegetable patch was sopping wet. Then they found the old watering can in a barn and used that.

After a few days the plants revived. The leaves stopped drooping and turned green again. By the end of the summer they were so big that the patch was a mass of green. Underneath the leaves you could see the tops of the big yellow turnips.

"Whose turnips are they?" the children asked. "Who planted them?"

"It must have been the children who were here before us, from the other nursery school," said Zina.

Just before they left, the children decided to pull up the turnips. They piled them on the grass. You should have seen what a big pile it was!

"That's a good harvest!" they cried happily.

Then they sat round in a circle, admiring the turnips for a long time and wondering what to do with them.

Then autumn came.

"Put on your coat and galoshes, it's cold outside," Grandma said to Pavlik as he was getting ready to go to nursery school.

Pavlik did as she said and went outside. All the puddles were frozen. The thin ice crunched under your feet. So many leaves had fallen off the trees that it was like walking on a carpet.

That day the children had Olga Nikolayevna. They were pretending to be at real school. They drew pictures and Olga Nikolayevna gave them marks. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. Olga Nikolayevna opened it and into the room stepped the postman.

"Got this for you," said the postman, placing a large box on the table.

"What's inside it?" the children asked eagerly.

"Don't know, kids. It's so heavy I could hardly carry it," said the postman.

He said goodbye and went out. Olga Nikolayevna ripped the cloth which was wrapped round the box and opened the lid.

"I don't understand," she muttered. "It's full of turnips!"

The children crowded round and stood on tiptoe, trying to look into the box. Pavlik even climbed onto a chair.

"Yes, they're turnips!" he cried. "Isn't that funny! Who could have sent us turnips?"

Some of the other boys and girls climbed on their chairs too.



"Wait a minute, children, there's a letter here," said Olga Nikolayevna.

She picked up a letter lying in the box and began to read:

"Dear boys and girls,

"When you left the country house, we looked after your turnips. And when summer was over, we picked the whole lot. They are big and very tasty. We all ate some of them, and they were delicious. We found out your address and decided to send the rest of the turnips to you. Hope you enjoy them!"

"So these are the turnips we planted!" they all shouted. "Look how big they are!"

Olga Nikolayevna put the box on the table so that everyone could see it. The boys and girls looked at the turnips and jumped for joy. There was a dreadful racket!

That evening when their parents came to collect them, the boys and girls showed them the turnips and told them how they had planted and watered them, how the seeds hadn't come up for ages, how they'd had to leave before the turnips were ready to pick, and how the other children had looked after them and posted them on.

After that whenever grown-ups came to the nursery school who hadn't seen the turnips, they were shown them by the children and told the story from beginning to end. And when new children started there, they were taken to see the turnips straight-away and heard the whole story.

The turnips lay in the box until the middle of winter. Then Olga Nikolayevna said that they should be eaten, because they mustn't stay too long in a warm room. So the boys and girls took the turnips into the kitchen and gave them to Aunt Dasha. Aunt Dasha peeled them, cut them neatly into round pieces, poured boiling water over them so that they would not taste bitter, and added some vegetable oil to them. Then the children sat down at the table and ate them.

“Mmm! That does taste nice!” they said.

“Do you remember what the turnip seeds were like?” said Tolya. “Teenzy weeny things! Fancy such big turnips growing out of them.”

“And it was all thanks to Pavlik,” said the boys and girls. “If it weren’t for Pavlik, we wouldn’t have had any turnips at all.”



THREE JOLLY HUNTERS

There were once three jolly hunters, Uncle Vanya, Uncle Fedya and Uncle Kuzma. One day they went into the forest. They walked for hours and saw all sorts of wild animals, but did not kill any. Then they decided to have a rest. They settled down on the green grass and began to tell stories about interesting things that had happened to them.

The first to tell a story was Uncle Vanya.

"Listen to this," he said. "It happened a long time ago. One winter's day I went into the forest. I didn't have a gun then, 'cos I was just a young lad. Suddenly I saw a wolf. A real biggun! I took to my heels. The wolf must have seen that I didn't have a gun, 'cos it started chasing me.

"'He's too fast for me,' I thought.

"I saw a tree and started scrambling up it. The wolf tried to get its teeth into me, but he only tore my trousers. I climbed up the tree and sat on a branch, shaking with fright, while the wolf sat on the ground below, looking up at me and licking his chops.

“‘Never mind,’ I thought. ‘I’ll stay up here until evening. When the wolf goes to sleep, I’ll creep away.’

“But by evening another wolf had come and they took it in turns to keep watch. While one slept, the other kept guard so I didn’t run away. A bit later a third wolf arrived. Then another and another. In the end there was a whole pack of them at the foot of the tree. They sat there gnashing their teeth at me, waiting for me to fall down.

“Towards morning it got bitter cold. About forty below. My arms and legs were frozen stiff. I lost my balance on the branch and fell down. Bang, crash! The pack of wolves rushed at me, and I heard a loud cracking sound.

“‘That must be my bones a-cracking,’ I thought.

“Then I realised the snow beneath me had caved in. I went tumbling down and landed in a den. It turned out to belong to a bear. Brother Bruin woke up, lumbered out of his den in alarm, saw the wolves and turned on them. In no time at all he drove them all away.

“I picked up my courage and peeped out of the den. There was no sign of the wolves, so I took to my heels and ran all the way home. Mum darned the hole in my trousers, so you could hardly see it. And when he heard what had happened Dad bought me a gun straightaway, so I never roamed round the forest again without one. That’s when I first became a hunter.”

Uncle Fedya and Uncle Kuzma laughed at Uncle Vanya being scared by the wolves. Then Uncle Fedya began his story.

“I once got an awful fright from a bear too. Only it was in summer. One day I went into the forest and forgot my gun at home. Suddenly I saw a bear lumbering towards me. I took to my heels and he began to chase me. I ran fast, but the bear ran faster. I could hear him panting behind me. So I turned round, pulled off my cap and threw it at him. The bear stopped for a moment, sniffed the cap and then started chasing me again.

I knew he would catch me up soon. And I still had a long way to go. So I wriggled out of my jacket as I ran and threw it at him.

“‘That should stop him for a minute or two,’ I thought.

“The bear clawed the jacket to pieces, saw there was nothing to eat in it, and set off after me again. I threw him my trousers and boots. There was nothing else for it. I had to save my skin.

“I ran out of the forest in my vest and pants. Ahead of me was a stream with a bridge over it. No sooner had I crossed the bridge than I heard a cracking sound. I looked round and saw the bridge collapse under the bear who fell into the water with a great splash.

“‘Serves you right, you old devil,’ I thought. ‘That’ll teach you to go frightening innocent folk.’

“Only it wasn’t very deep under the bridge. The bear climbed out onto the bank, shook himself hard and ambled back into the forest.

“‘Good for you, Uncle Fedya,’ I said to myself. ‘You fooled him good and proper. But how am I going to get home? People will see me wearing next to nothing and laugh themselves silly.’

“I decided to sit in the bushes and go home when it got dark. So I hid in the bushes until evening, then crept out and set off home. Whenever I saw someone coming towards me, I hid behind a corner, skulking there in the dark out of sight.

“At long last there was my house. I felt everywhere for the key to open the door, but I couldn’t find it. It was in my jacket pocket. And I’d thrown my jacket to the bear. I should have taken the key out first.

“What could I do? I tried to knock the door down, but it was too strong.

“‘I can’t spend the night out here,’ I thought.

“So I broke a window pane and began to climb in.

"Suddenly someone grabbed hold of my legs and yelled with all his might:

"Stop thief! Stop thief!"

"People came running up.

"Stop him! It's a thief. He was climbing in the window!" they shouted.

"Take him to the police-station," cried others.

"No need to take me to the police-station, my hearties," I said. "It's my own house."

"Don't take any notice of him, lads," said the one who had grabbed me. "I've been watching him for some time. He keeps hiding in dark corners. First he tried to knock the door down, then he started to climb through the window."

"A policeman appeared and they all started telling him what had happened.

"Let's see your identity papers," the policeman said to me.

"I don't have any identity papers," I told him. "The bear ate them."

"Cut out the wisecracks! How could a bear have eaten them?"

"I wanted to explain, but nobody would listen.

"Then my neighbour Auntie Dasha came out to see what all the noise was about. She saw me and said:

"Let him go. That's Uncle Fedya, our neighbour. He really does live in this house."

"The policeman believed her and let me go.

"Next day I bought myself a new suit, cap and boots. And I've lived happily ever after in my fine new clothes."

Uncle Vanya and Uncle Kuzma laughed at Uncle Fedya's adventures. Then Uncle Kuzma said:

"I met a bear once too. It was in winter. I went into the forest, saw this bear and shot him with my gun — bang! The bear fell to the ground. So I put him on my sledge and set

off home. It was hard work dragging him through the village on my sledge. But the village lads gave me a hand.

"So I got the bear home and left him in the yard. My little son Igor saw him and gawped with surprise.

"But my wife said:

"That's good! We'll skin it and make you a bearskin coat.'

"Then my wife and son went to have tea. I was just about to skin the bear, when our dog Trickster rushed into the yard and sank its teeth into the bear's ear. The bear leapt up and growled. He hadn't been dead at all, only stunned with fright from my shot.

"Trickster got scared and ran into his kennel. The bear turned on me. I took to my heels. Then I saw the henhouse ladder and climbed up it onto the roof. The bear lumbered up after me onto the roof, which caved in and sent the two of us flying into the henhouse. The hens got an awful fright. They clucked like mad and flew off in all directions.

"I ran out of the henhouse and into my home with the bear hot on my heels. I went into the room, and he followed. Then I tripped on the table and knocked it over. The dishes slid onto the floor and the samovar too. Igor hid under the sofa.

"Seeing there was no escape I collapsed onto the bed and closed my eyes tight. The bear lumbered up, shook me with one paw and roared:

"Get up quick! Get up!"

"I opened my eyes and saw that it was my wife.

"Get up,' she said. 'It's long past daybreak. You wanted to go hunting today.'

"I got up and went hunting, but I didn't see any more bears that day. And I lived happily ever after, eating bread with my cabbage soup and showing off my nice new suit, so there!"

Uncle Vanya and Uncle Fedya had a good laugh at this story. And Uncle Kuzma laughed with them.



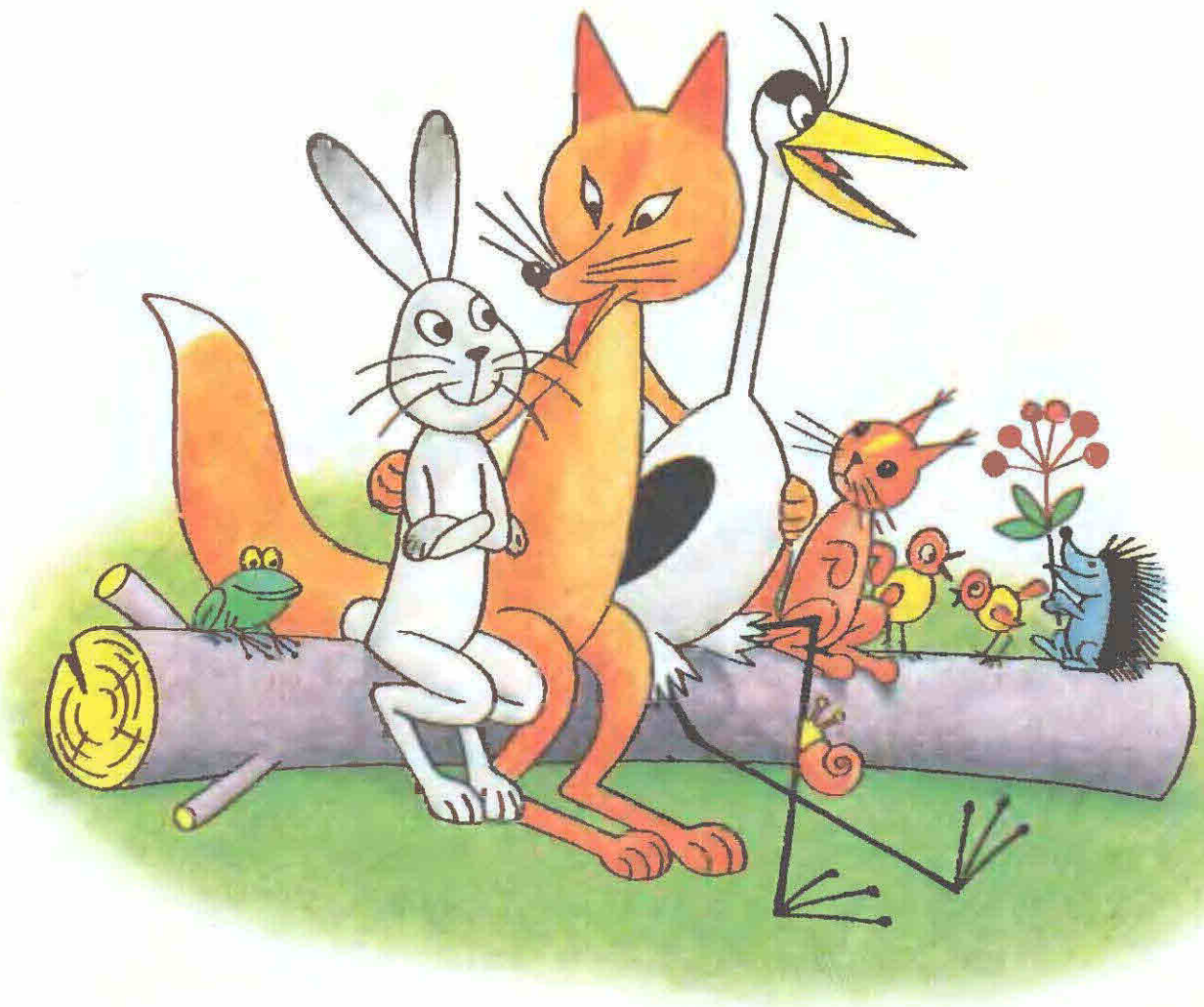
Then the three of them set off home.

"We did have a nice day's hunting, didn't we? We didn't kill a single wild beast, but we had a very jolly time."

"I don't like killing animals," said Uncle Fedya. "All those little hares, and squirrels, and hedgehogs and foxes should live in the forest in peace. They shouldn't be hunted."

"And the birds should live in peace too," said Uncle Kuzma. "The forest would be a sad place without animals and birds. None of them should be hunted. We should love animals, not kill them."

See what nice jolly hunters they were!



When we Laugh

Under my window is a front garden with low wrought-iron railings round it. In winter the yardman sweeps the snow off the street behind the iron railings, and I throw bits of bread out of the small top window for the sparrows. As soon as they notice the bread in the snow, they come swooping down and perch on the branches of the tree which grows in front of my window. They sit there for a long time, peeking anxiously left and right, but not daring to fly down. They must be afraid of the passers-by in the street.

Then one sparrow is brave enough to fly down from the branch, settle in the snow and start pecking the bread. Another sparrow sees him and flutters down too. He is followed by a third, then a fourth... And soon the whole flock is pecking away at the bread in the snow, not paying the slightest attention to the passers-by.

Sparrows are by nature friendly, sociable birds. They are fond of dining at the communal table, so to speak. One of them hopped up to a piece of bread and began pecking at it from underneath. Another tossed his head, puffed out his chest like a proud steed, and pecked away at the same piece from the top. Realising

suddenly that he was disturbing his fellow sparrow, he hopped over at once to another piece close by. "There are enough pieces for everyone!" he seemed to be saying. "No need to squabble over them."

Not all sparrows are so obliging, however. Some get hold of a piece of bread and drag it aside, so that no one else can get it.

You can't help laughing when you watch these stand-offish sparrows. One of them dug a heavy piece of bread out of the snow, dragged it away from the other sparrows and was about to tuck into it, when another sparrow flew up, snatched the bread rudely and flew off with it.

You should have seen the poor sparrow who had been taken unawares. He looked so surprised. His beak was gawping open in amazement.

I noticed the greedy sparrow who takes other sparrows' bread long ago and have even thought up a name for him — Afonka Meany. Afonka Meany never eats with the rest of the sparrows. He flies up suddenly when no one is expecting him, grabs the largest piece from some unsuspecting fellow sparrow and flies off with it up into the eaves. Sometimes he steals such a big piece that it pulls his head down and he has to fly almost upside down. He flaps his wings so hard I can hear the noise through the closed window.

I am sure that one day Afonka Meany will grab such a big piece that it will pull him down to the ground. I deliberately throw him big pieces to see where his greed will land him up.

There's another troublemaker who I call Bully. He's forever swooping down on some poor, innocent sparrow, whom he shoves out of the way to peck once or twice at his food. Then he repeats the whole procedure with a second and a third. Perhaps he does it out of envy or because the other sparrows' food always looks nicer, but he's always pouncing upon them! In the end he tries

it on a sparrow who's as aggressive as he is or simply won't give way, who doesn't want other sparrows' food, but refuses to part with his own. Then they charge each other, bang chests and fly up like two fighting cocks. Bully tries to peck the other bird hard, but the other bird fights back. In the heat of the battle they forget all about the bread. It's great fun watching them! When the sparrows have eaten all the bread, they fly up and perch in the tree to have a rest. They clean their beaks on the branches and look well-fed and pleased with life.

One day I decided to give them a surprise, that is, an unexpected present.

"Why should they have to hop about in the snow, poor things, getting their legs all cold! I'll fix it so they can eat without leaving the tree."

I put on my hat and coat, went into the garden and began to stick pieces of soft bread on the branches of the tree.

"There," I thought. "The sparrows will be pleased!"

Then I went inside and waited. I stood by the window for a whole hour or so, but not a single sparrow showed the slightest interest.

"What's the matter?" I wondered. "Can't they see it?"

Suddenly a strange, scruffy sparrow flew down from somewhere and perched on the branch next to the bits of bread. He had a funny short tail, as if it had been plucked, the feathers on his neck were all tousled and there was a broken feather sticking up on his back.

"Who's this Scruffy-Duffy?" I thought. "I've never seen one like him before. Perhaps he's just escaped from a hungry cat or had a scrap with someone."

Meanwhile Scruffy-Duffy sat on the branch and did not even notice the bread. Then he suddenly caught sight of it. His eyes began to blink nervously, his beak dropped open in dismay, he

let go of the branch without meaning to and dropped down as if he had been shot. Halfway to the ground, he suddenly came to, flapped his wings and flew away, gradually gaining height, at an oblique angle across the street.

I burst out laughing. The silly sparrow had been afraid of the bread stuck on the branch. At first he did not notice the bits around him, and perched on the branch as usual. But then he saw something strange sitting next to him, and got so scared that he fell off the branch. After all he had never seen bread growing on trees before.

The other, more cautious sparrows must have noticed something strange on the tree straightaway and decided not to sit on it. They probably hadn't realised that it was bread. Sparrows may be small, but they are very careful. Anything unusual puts them on their guard.

I don't know what the sparrows thought, of course. Maybe they imagined the bits of bread were living creatures who might hurt them. In any case not a single sparrow ventured near the tree while the bread was on the branches. But as soon as I took it away, they flew over again as carefree as ever.

After that I never saw Scruffy-Duffy again. He had probably strayed over from another street.

As a matter of fact I'm very fond of sparrows. They're very lovable and amusing. I used to wonder why we laugh at them, until I realised that what amuses us about them is what amuses us in human beings. We laugh at people who think only of themselves and not of others. We laugh at louts, boors, bullies and squabblers who are selfish and can't get on with other people. We laugh at greedy, envious people who try to grab everything for themselves, and at snooty know-alls who think they're the cat's whiskers and nobody else counts for anything. And we laugh at people who are scatter-brained, careless or cowardly, afraid of silly little things.

A friend of mine (a very learned professor) once told me that we laugh at sparrows when we notice that they are like human beings.

But I think it's the other way round: we laugh at people when we notice that they are like sparrows in some way. Think about it, when you've got a moment.



Bendum, Twistum And the Vacuum Cleaner

Anyone who has read *The Adventures of Dunno and His Friends* will know that Dunno has lots of friends, who were little Mites like him.

His friends include two mechanics called Bendum and Twistum, who like making all sorts of things. One day they decided to make a vacuum cleaner and tidy up the flat.

First they made a round metal box consisting of two halves. Then they put an electric motor with a fan in one half, fixed a length of rubber piping to the other, and joined the two halves with a piece of thick cloth to hold the dust.

They worked hard all day and all night, until the vacuum cleaner was ready the next morning.

Everyone was still asleep, but Bendum and Twistum were dying to see how the cleaner worked.

"Let's clean the carpet in the bedroom first," suggested Twistum.

He switched on the vacuum cleaner, and the dust from the carpet flew into the piping. The suction was so strong that it

gobbled up Scatterbrain's socks which were lying around under the bed.

Then it blew Dr Pillman's watch off the table and gobbled it up as well. Bendum and Twistum didn't notice this, because they were both very sleepy.

Under the table was Blobs the artist's box of paints. When Bendum cleaned away the dust under the table, lots of paints in the box disappeared too.

"Now let's try cleaning some clothes," said Bendum and had a go at Skippy's coat. The dust from the coat flew into the piping, together with the buttons.

Then they began cleaning Podgy's trousers. He always had sweets in his pockets. The vacuum cleaner was so powerful that it sucked the sweets out of the pockets.

After that they started on Doono's jacket. Only then did Twistum notice Doono's fountain pen being whisked out of the pocket. He wanted to switch the vacuum cleaner off, but Bendum said:

"Don't worry. We'll open up the vacuum cleaner afterwards and take it out."

Then they set about cleaning the sofa. The nails popped out of the upholstery and disappeared down the piping.

The upholstery gradually peeled off, the springs sprang out, the back collapsed, the sofa fell to pieces and all the stuffing disappeared into the piping together with the springs.

In the end one of the sofa's legs got stuck in the piping, so the vacuum cleaner couldn't gobble up anything else.

"Oh, well," said Bendum. "Let's go to bed now. When we get up, we'll mend the sofa and take all the nails out of the vacuum cleaner."

The two friends got into bed and fell fast asleep.

The first to wake up that morning was Scatterbrain, who

started hunting for his socks. Everyone laughed at him, because he was always losing things.

Then Grouser got up and discovered to his amazement that his trousers had disappeared.

There wasn't a single button on Maybee's clothes. He had to walk around holding his trousers, because they wouldn't stay up without buttons.

Everyone had lost something. Everyone, that is, except Dunno.

"I bet all this is Dunno's fault," said Skippy. "Why hasn't he lost anything?"

"I'm not to blame, everyone!" cried Dunno. "I didn't lose anything because I went to sleep with all my clothes on. I was so tired last night, I couldn't be bothered to get undressed."

In the end Doono discovered in the corner of the room a mysterious contraption with a sofa leg sticking out of its pipe.

He realised at once that this must be the work of Bendum and Twistum, and went to wake them.

Bendum and Twistum got up, opened the vacuum cleaner and discovered all the lost things inside it.

"The motor we used was too strong," said Twistum. "We must put a weaker one in, then the vacuum cleaner won't suck up big things."

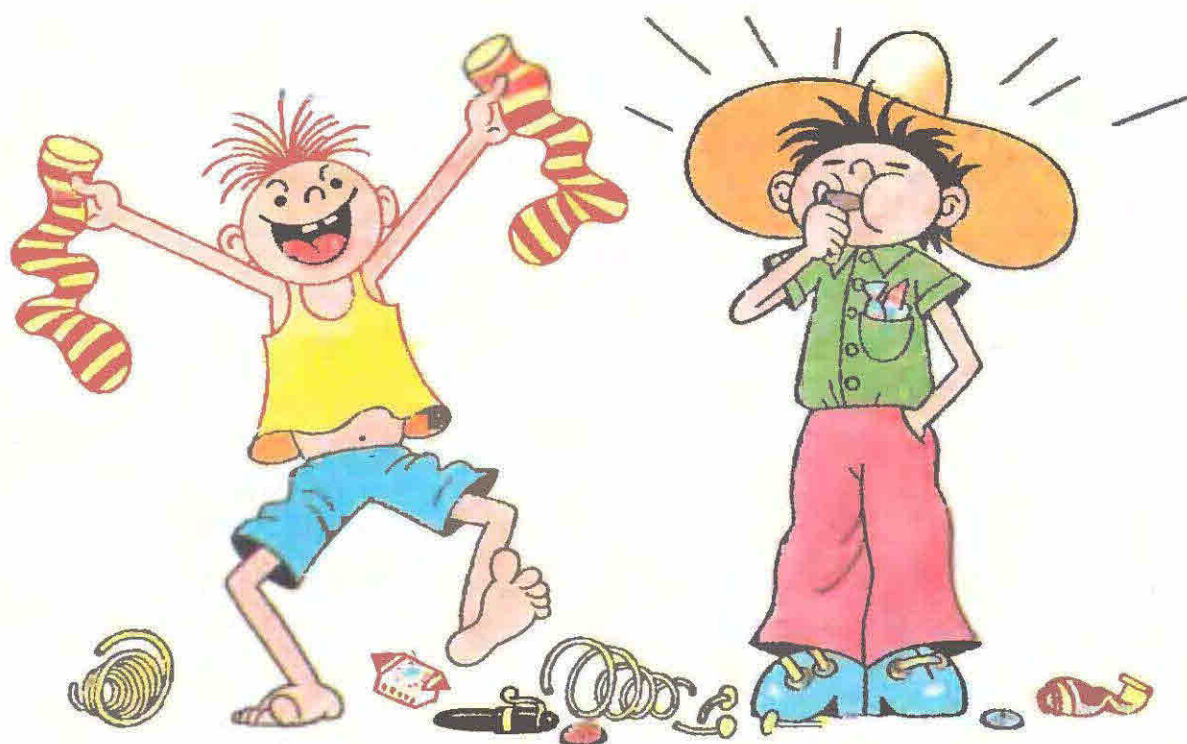
A long queue formed by the vacuum cleaner. Each Mite got back what he had lost: socks for Scatterbrain, buttons for Maybee and Skippy, and trousers for Grouser.

Then Dunno said to Bendum:

"Could you see if the whistle I lost last summer is in there too?"

They all laughed at Dunno. But then Bendum suddenly discovered Dunno's whistle among the other objects.

Everyone was most surprised and couldn't understand how a whistle that had been lost last year could turn up in a vacuum cleaner that hadn't existed last summer at all!



Bobby Visits Barboss

Once upon a time there was a dog named Barboss. And he had a friend called Vasska, who was a cat. They both lived with Grandad. When the old man went off to work, Barboss guarded the house and Vasska caught mice.

One time when the old man had gone to work, Vasska ran off somewhere leaving Barboss at home alone. Being bored with nothing to do the old dog climbed onto the window-sill and looked out of the window, gaping in all directions.

"It's all right for the old man," thought Barboss, "he's gone to work and has something to do. Vasska has a good time too: he's run off to prowl across the rooftops. But I've got to sit at home and guard the flat."

Just at that moment Barboss's friend Bobby came running down the street. They often met in the yard and played together. When Barboss caught sight of his friend, he perked up.

"Hey, Bobby, where are you off to?" he shouted.

"Nowhere," said Bobby. "I'm just running. And what are you sitting at home for? Let's go for a walk."

"I can't," answered Barboss. "Grandad's instructed me to guard the house. It'd be better for you to visit me."

"Won't anyone shoo me out?" asked Bobby.

"No, Grandad's left for work. There's no one home. Climb in through the window."

Bobby climbed through the open window and began to look about him in curiosity. "You've a fine life," he told Barboss. "You live in a house, I in a kennel. The roof leaks, I've no room to move about. Pretty awful conditions, I can tell you."

"Yes," replied Barboss, "we have a decent flat: two living rooms with a kitchen and then there's the bathroom. Go where you wish."

"My mistress doesn't even let me into the hallway," complained Bobby. "She says I'm a yard-dog and have to live in a kennel. One time I got into one of the rooms — you ought to have seen the fuss. They screamed and yelled, even beat me with a stick." He scratched behind his ear with his paw, and then noticed the clock on the wall with its pendulum.

"What on earth's that thing hanging on the wall?" he asked. "All that tick-tock, tick-tock, with its tail hanging down."

"That's a clock," replied Barboss. "Haven't you ever seen a clock before?"

"No. What is it for?"

Barboss really wasn't sure himself, but he tried to explain, "Well, it's like this, you know ... a clock ... it goes..."

"How do you mean 'it goes'?" said Bobby in surprise. "It doesn't have any legs, does it?"

"Well that's just a figure of speech; it doesn't go anywhere actually, it just ticks away and strikes."

"Oho, so it starts hitting people, does it?" said Bobby.

"No, no, how can it hit anyone?"

"But you said yourself that it strikes..."

"I meant that it chimes: boom, boom!"

"Well, you should have said so."

Bobby noticed a comb on the table and asked,

"And what sort of saw do you have here?"

"What saw? That's a comb."

"What's it for?"

"You are a numbskull," said Barboss. "Anyone can see at once that you've lived an age in a kennel. Don't you know what a comb's for? To comb your hair with."

"How come? To comb your hair with?"

Barboss picked up the comb and began to comb the hair on his head with it. "Just look, this is the way to comb your hair. Go to the mirror and comb your own hair."

Bobby took the comb, went over to the mirror and stared at his reflection. "Hey, look here," he shouted, pointing to the mirror, "there's another dog!"

"That's you, silly, in the mirror!" laughed Barboss.

"What do you mean, it's me? I'm here, and that other dog's there."

Barboss walked over to the mirror. Bobby saw his reflection and cried, "Look, look, now there are two of them!"

"No, no," said Barboss. "That's not two of them, it's two of us. They in the mirror are not alive."

"How do you mean, not alive?" cried Bobby. "They're moving, look."

"No, you silly fellow," said Barboss. "It's us that are moving. Don't you see that one of the dogs is like me?"

"True, it is!" said Bobby with relief. "It's the spitting image of you."

"And the other dog is like you."

"Never!" replied Bobby. "It's a pretty awful-looking mongrel with crooked paws."



"The same paws as yours."

"No, you're having me on! You've put two strange dogs in there, you don't think I'll swallow it, do you?" said Bobby.

He began to comb his hair in front of the mirror, then suddenly burst out laughing.

"Just look at that, that silly fool in the mirror is combing his hair too. What an idiot!"

Barboss only snorted and moved away. When Bobby finished preening himself, he put the comb back and said,

"It's a funny place you've got here. A strange sort of clock, mirror with dogs, flibbertigibbets and combs."

"We've even got a television," boasted Barboss pointing to the television set.

"What's that for?" asked Bobby.

"Now that's a marvellous thing: it can do anything — sing, play, even show pictures."

"What? That old box?"

"Yes."

"Never on your life!"

"On my honour!"

"All right then, let's hear it play."

Barboss switched on the television. And music came out. The dogs were happy and began to prance about the room; they danced and danced till they were fit to drop.

"That's made me hungry," said Bobby.

"Sit down at the table and be my guest," suggested Barboss.

Bobby took a seat at the table, while Barboss opened the cupboard revealing a bowl of jelly on the bottom shelf and a big pie on the top. He took out the jelly bowl, set it on the floor while he climbed up to the topmost shelf to reach the pie. As he climbed down with it, his hind leg went straight into the jelly and he slipped backwards right into the bowl. Now his back was all covered in red jelly.

"Bobby, quick, come and eat the jelly!" cried Barboss.

"Where's the jelly?" he said.

"All over my back," said Barboss. "Lick it off."

So he did without second bidding.

"Now that's what I call a tasty jelly," he said.

Together they then carried the pie to the table, sat down with it on top of the table to get at it better, and munched and talked over their meal.

"You certainly live well," said Bobby. "You've got everything."

"Yes," agreed Barboss. "I live well all right. I do what I like: if I want to comb my hair, I do so; if I want I can play with the television, I eat and drink what I like or even lounge about in bed all day."

"Doesn't your old man mind you messing up his bed?"

"What? It's my bed, not his!" said Barboss.

"But where does the old man sleep?"

"Over there in the corner, on the mat."

Once he'd got started, Barboss could not help lying further.

"Here everything is mine," he boasted. "The table's mine, the cupboard's mine, and all that's in it is mine too."

"And can I have a lie on your bed?" asked Bobby. "Never in my life have I slept in a bed."

"Come on then," agreed Barboss.

They both sprawled across the bed. As they were lying there Bobby saw a leather thong hanging on the wall.

"What's that thong for up there?" he asked.

"The thong? Oh, that's for old Grandad. If he doesn't behave himself, I just give him a taste of it," replied Barboss.

"Very good," said Bobby approvingly.

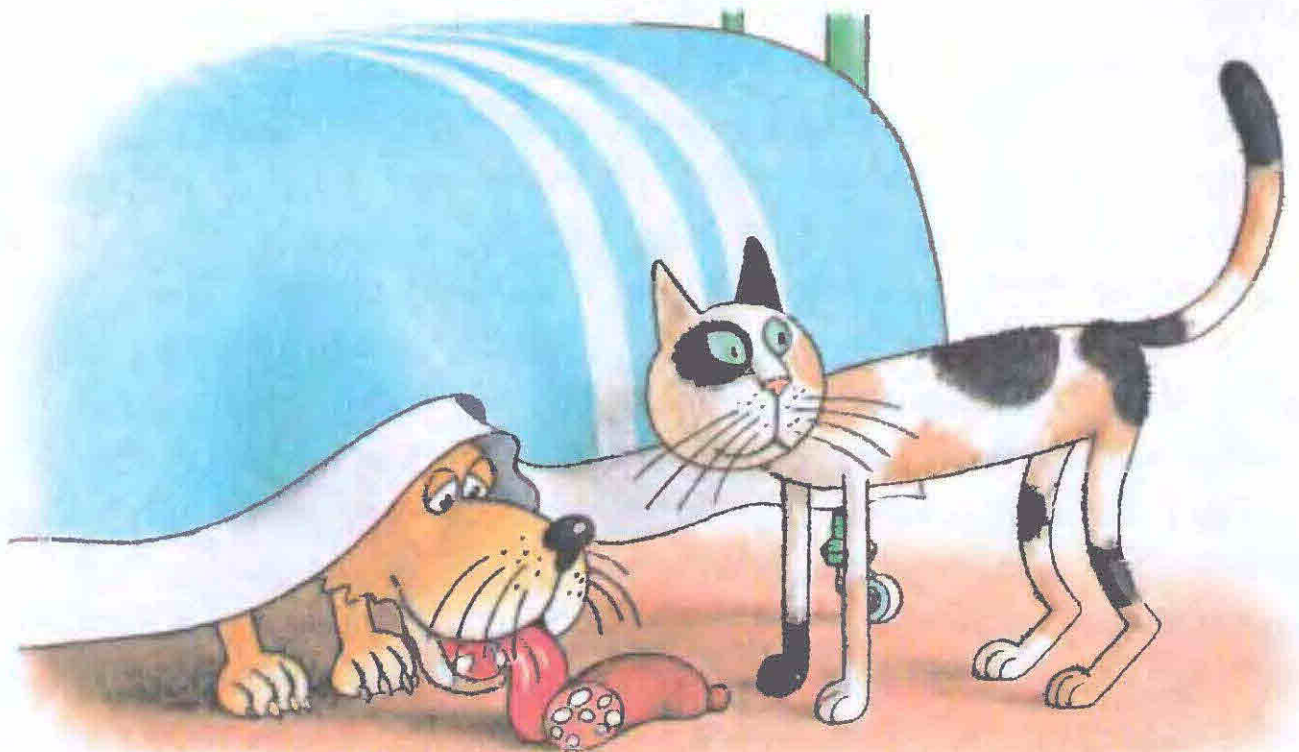
They lay there on the bed, got nice and snug and fell asleep. They didn't even hear the old man coming in from work. And when he saw the two dogs on his bed, he took down the thong from the wall and raised it threateningly. In great fright Bobby

leapt through the window and ran straight to his kennel, while Barboss dived under the bed and couldn't even be fetched out with the broomstick. He sat there till evening.

Vasska the cat returned home in the evening, saw Barboss cowering under the bed, and realised what was up at once.

"Hey, Vasska," said Barboss, "I've been punished again. I don't even know myself what for. Fetch me a bit of sausage if you can scrounge any from Grandad."

Vasska sidled up to the old man, began to miaow and rub his back up against the man's legs. Grandad threw him a piece of sausage. Vasska ate half himself and took the other piece to poor old Barboss under the bed.



Mishka's Porridge

Last summer when I was living in the country with my mother, Mishka came to stay with us. I was very pleased to see him because I had been quite lonely without him. Mum was pleased to see him too.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said. "You two boys can keep each other company. I have to go to town early tomorrow, and I don't know when I'll be back. Do you think you can manage here by yourselves for two days?"

"Of course we can," I said. "We aren't babies."

"You'll have to make your own breakfast. Do you know how to cook porridge?"

"I do," said Mishka. "It's easy as anything."

"Mishka," I said, "are you quite sure you know? When did you ever cook porridge?"

"Don't worry. I've seen Mum cook it. You leave it to me. I won't let you starve. I'll make you the best porridge you've ever tasted."

In the morning Mum left us a supply of bread and some jam for our tea and showed us where the oatmeal was. She told us how to cook it too, but I didn't bother to listen. Why should I bother if Mishka knows all about it, I thought.

Then Mum went away and Mishka and I decided to go down to the river to fish. We got out our fishing-tackle and dug up some worms.

"Just a minute," I said. "Who's going to cook the porridge if we go down to the river?"

"Who wants to bother with cooking?" said Mishka. "It's too much trouble. We can eat bread and jam instead. There's plenty of bread. We'll cook the porridge later on when we get hungry."

We made a lot of jam sandwiches and went off to the river. We went swimming and lay on the sandy beach afterwards drying ourselves and eating our sandwiches. Then we fished. We sat for a long time but the fish wouldn't bite. All we got was a dozen or so gudgeons, teeny-weeny ones. We spent most of the day down at the river. Late in the afternoon we got terribly hungry and hurried home to get something to eat.

"Now then, Mishka," I said. "You're the expert. What shall we make? Something that won't take long to cook. I'm awfully hungry."

"Let's make some porridge," said Mishka. "It's the easiest."

"All right," I said.

We lit the stove. Mishka got the meal and pot.

"See you make plenty while you're at it. I could eat a horse."

He nearly filled the pot up with meal and poured in water up to the brim.

"Isn't that too much water?" I said.

"No, that's the way Mother makes it. You look after the stove and leave the porridge to me."

So I kept the fire going while Mishka cooked the porridge, which means that he sat and watched the pot, because the porridge cooked by itself.

Before long it got quite dark, and we had to light the lamp. The porridge went on cooking. Suddenly I looked up and saw the pot lid rising and the porridge spilling out over the side.

"Hey, Mishka," I said. "What's the matter with the porridge?"

"Why, what's wrong with it?"

"It's climbing right out of the pot!"

Mishka grabbed a spoon and began pushing the porridge back into the pot. He pushed and pushed, but it kept swelling up and spilling over the side.

"I don't know what's happened to it. Perhaps it's ready?"

I took a spoon and tasted a little, but the meal was still hard and dry.

"Where's all the water gone?"

"I don't know," said Mishka. "I put an awful lot in. Perhaps there's a hole in the pot?"

We looked all over the pot but there wasn't any sign of a hole.

"Must have evaporated," he said. "We'll have to add some more."

He took some of the porridge out of the pot and put it on a plate; he had to take out quite a bit to make room for the water. Then we put the pot back on the stove and let it cook some more. It cooked and cooked and after a while it began spilling over the side again.

"Hey, what's this!" cried Mishka. "Why won't it stay in the pot?"

He snatched up his spoon and scooped out some more porridge and added another cup of water.

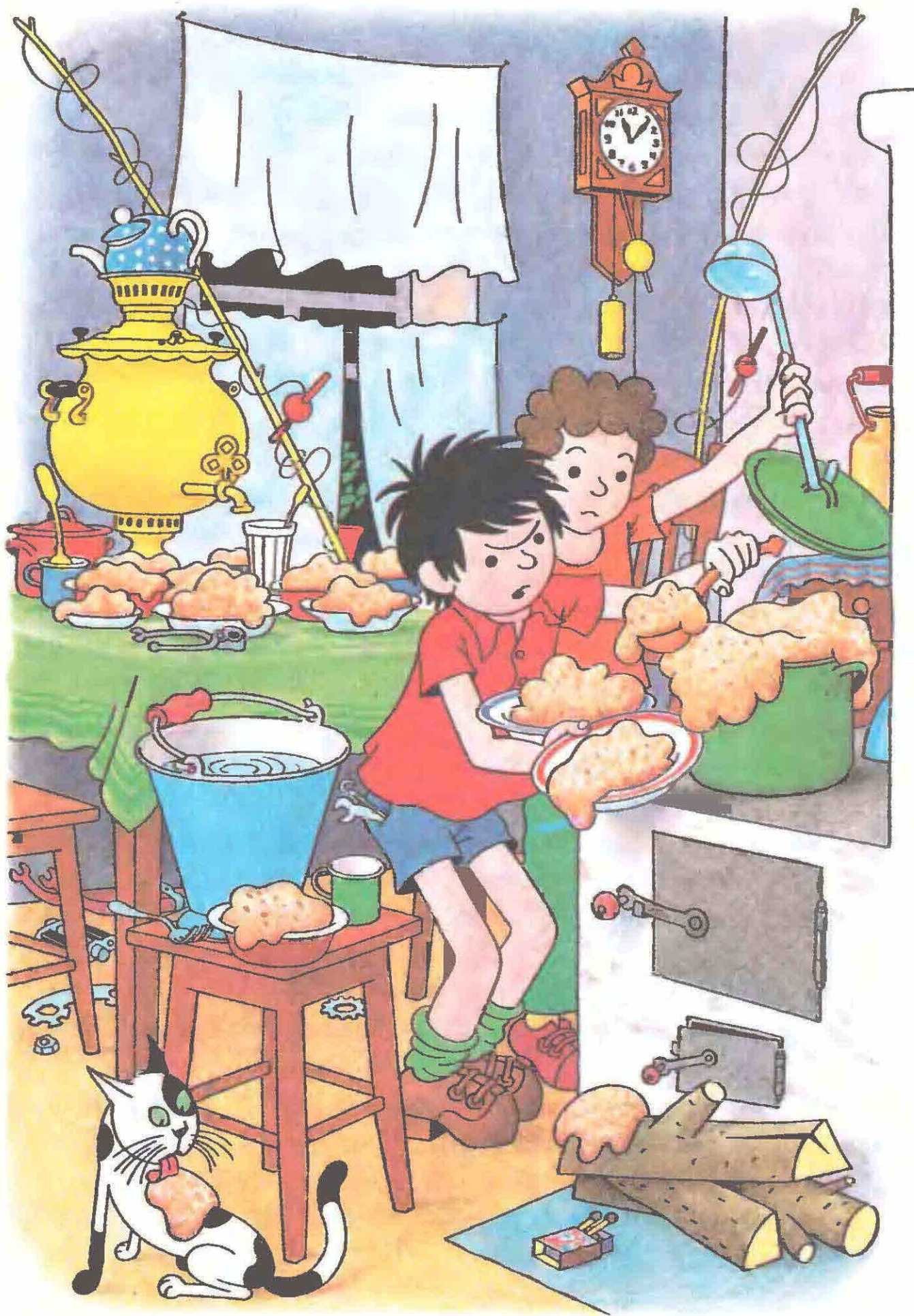
"Look at that," he said. "You thought there was too much water."

The porridge went on cooking.

And would you believe it, in a little while it lifted the lid and came crawling out again!

I said: "You must have put too much meal in. That's what it is. It swells when it cooks and there's not enough room in the pot for it."

"Yes, that must be it," said Mishka. "It's all your fault. You told me to put a lot in because you were hungry, remember?"



"How do I know how much to put in? You're the one who's supposed to know how to cook."

"So I do. I'd have it cooked by now if you hadn't interfered."

"All right, cook away, I shan't say another word."

I went off in a huff and Mishka went on cooking the porridge, that is, he kept scooping out the extra porridge and adding water. Soon the whole table was covered with plates of half-cooked porridge. And he added water each time.

Finally I lost patience.

"You're not doing it right. This way the porridge won't be ready till morning."

"Well, that's how they do it in big restaurants. Didn't you know that? They always cook dinner the night before so it should be ready by morning."

"That's all right for restaurants. They don't need to hurry because they have heaps of other food."

"We don't need to hurry either."

"Don't we?! I'm starving. And besides it's time to go to bed. See how late it is."

"You'll have plenty of time to sleep," he said, throwing another glass of water into the pot. Suddenly it dawned on me what was wrong.

"Of course it won't cook if you keep adding cold water," I said.

"You think you can cook porridge without water?"

"No, I think you've still got too much meal in that pot."

I took the pot, spilled out half the meal and told him to fill it with water.

He took the mug and went to the pail.

"Dash it," he said. "The water's all gone."

"What shall we do now? It's pitch dark, we'll never be able to find the well."

"Rats, I'll bring some in a jiffy."

He took matches, tied a rope round the handle of the pail and went off to the well. In a few minutes he was back.

"Where's the water?" I asked him.

"Water? Out there in the well."

"Don't be silly. What've you done with the pail?"

"The pail? That's in the well too."

"In the well?"

"That's right."

"You mean you dropped it?"

"That's right."

"Oh, you silly ass! We'll starve to death this way. How are we going to get water now?"

"We can use the kettle."

I took the kettle. "Give me the rope."

"I haven't got it."

"Where is it?"

"Down there."

"Down where?"

"In the well."

"So you dropped the pail along with the rope?"

"That's right."

We started hunting for another piece of rope, but we couldn't find any.

"Never mind. I'll go and ask the neighbours," said Mishka.

"You can't," I said. "Look at the time. Everyone's gone to bed long ago."

As luck would have it, both of us felt awfully thirsty. We were simply dying for a drink.

Mishka said: "It's always like that. When there's no water you always feel thirsty. That's why people always get thirsty in the desert — because there's no water there!"

"Never mind about deserts," I said. "You go and find some rope."

"Where shall I find it? I've looked everywhere. Let's use the fishing-line."

"Is it strong enough?"

"I think so."

"What if it isn't?"

"If it isn't, it'll break."

We unwound the fishing-line, tied it to the kettle and went out to the well. I lowered the kettle into the well and filled it with water. The line was as taut as a violin string.

"It's going to snap," I said. "You'll see."

"Perhaps it'll hold if we lift it very, very carefully," said Mishka.

I raised it as carefully as I could. I had just got it above the water when there was a splash, and the kettle was gone.

"Did it break?" asked Mishka.

"Of course it did. How are we going to get water now?"

"Let's try the samovar," said Mishka.

"No. We might as well throw the samovar straight into the well. Less trouble. Besides, we haven't any more rope."

"All right then, use the pot."

"We haven't so many pots to throw away," I said.

"Well, then, try a tumbler."

"Do you want to spend the rest of the night scooping up water by the tumblerful?"

"But what are we going to do? We've got to finish cooking the porridge. Besides, I'm terribly thirsty."

"Let's try the tin mug," I said. "It's a little bigger than a tumbler anyway."

We went back to the house, tied the fishing-line to the mug so that it wouldn't overturn and went back to the well. After we had drunk our fill of water Mishka said:

"It's always like that — when you're thirsty you think you could drink up the sea, but when you begin drinking you find

one mugful is plenty. That's because people are naturally greedy."

"Stop jabbering and bring the pot out here. We can fill it with water straight from the well. It will save us running back and forth a dozen times."

Mishka brought the pot and stood it right at the edge of the well. I very nearly knocked it off with my elbow.

"Silly ass," I said. "What's the idea of putting it right under my elbow? Hold on to it and keep as far from the well as you can, or you'll send it flying into the water."

Mishka took the pot and moved away from the well. I filled it up and we went back to the house. By this time our porridge was quite cold and the fire had gone out. We got it going again and put the pot back on the stove to cook. After a long time it started to boil, thickened gradually and made plopping noises.

"Hear that?" said Mishka. "We're going to have some wonderful porridge soon."

I took a little on a spoon and tasted it. It was awful! It had a nasty bitter burnt taste, and we had forgotten to salt it. Mishka tasted it too and spat it out at once.

"No," he said. "I'd rather die of hunger than eat such stuff."

"You would certainly die if you did eat it," I said.

"But what shall we do?"

"I don't know."

"Donkeys!" cried Mishka. "We've forgotten the fish."

"We're not going to start bothering with fish at this time of night. It will be morning soon."

"We won't boil them, we'll fry them. They'll be ready in a minute, you'll see."

"Oh, all right," I said. "But if it's going to take as long as the porridge, count me out."

"It'll be ready in five minutes, you'll see."

Mishka cleaned the fish and put them on the frying-pan. The

pan got hot and the fish stuck to the bottom. He tried to pull them off and made quite a mess of them.

I said: "Whoever tried frying fish without oil?"

Mishka got a bottle of vegetable oil and poured some on to the pan and put it into the stove straight on the coals so it should cook faster. The oil spluttered and crackled and suddenly it caught fire. Mishka snatched up the frying-pan and I wanted to pour water on it, but there wasn't a drop of water in the house, so it burned and burned until all the oil had burned out. The room was full of smoke and all that was left of the fish were a few burned coals.

"Well," said Mishka, "what are we going to fry now?"

"No more frying. Besides spoiling good food you're liable to burn the house down. You've done enough cooking for one day!"

"But what shall we eat?"

We tried chewing raw meal, but it wasn't much fun. We tried a raw onion, but it was bitter. We tried vegetable oil and nearly made ourselves sick. Finally we found the jam pot, licked it clean and went to bed. It was very late by then.

We woke up in the morning as hungry as wolves. Mishka wanted to cook some porridge, but when I saw him get out the meal I got cold all over.

"Don't you dare," I said. "I'll go to Aunt Natasha, our landlady, and ask her to cook some porridge for us."

We went to Aunt Natasha and told her all about it and promised to weed her garden for her if she would cook some porridge for us. She took pity on us and gave us some milk and cabbage pie while she cooked our porridge. And we ate and ate as if we couldn't stop. Aunt Natasha's little boy Vovka stood watching with his eyes popping out.

At last we had had enough. Aunt Natasha gave us a hook and some rope and we went to fish the pail and the kettle out of the well. It took us a long time before we finally managed to pull them up.

But luckily nothing got lost. After that, Mishka and I and little Vovka weeded Aunt Natasha's garden.

Mishka said: "Weeding is nothing. Anybody can do it. It's easy. Much easier than cooking porridge, anyway."



Laddy

Mishka and I had a wonderful time in the country this summer. I do love the country! You can do all sorts of exciting things like wandering about in the woods picking mushrooms or berries, bathing in the river and lying in the sun, and when you get tired of bathing, you can fish. When Mum's holiday ended and the time came to go back to town, Mishka and I felt very sad. We went about looking so miserable that Aunt Natasha took pity on us and persuaded Mum to let Mishka and me stay on for a while. She said Mum needn't worry, she would take good care of us. So Mum finally agreed and went back to town without us, and Mishka and I stayed on with Aunt Natasha.

Now Aunt Natasha had a dog called Diana. The day Mum left Diana had puppies. Six of them: five were black with brown spots and one was brown all over except for a black spot on his ear. When Aunt Natasha saw the puppies she said:

"Oh dear, that dog is a nuisance. She's always having puppies. What on earth shall I do with them? I shall have to drown them."

"Oh, please don't drown them!" we pleaded. "They want to live too. Better give them away to the neighbours."

"The neighbours have dogs of their own," said Aunt Natasha. "I can't keep so many dogs."

Mishka and I begged and pleaded. We promised to find homes for the puppies ourselves after they had grown up a little bit. At last Aunt Natasha gave in and said we might keep them.

Soon they grew bigger and started running about the garden and barking loudly like real dogs. Mishka and I had great fun playing with them.

Aunt Natasha kept reminding us of our promise to give them away, but we felt sorry for Diana. She would be very unhappy without her children.

"I ought never to have given in to you," said Aunt Natasha. "Now I'll be left with all these dogs on my hands. How shall I feed them all?"

So Mishka and I had to get busy and look for homes for the pups. And what a time we had! Nobody wanted to take them. We went from house to house for days and after a lot of trouble we managed to place three of them. Then two more were taken by some people in the neighbouring village. That left one — the pup with the black spot on its ear. We liked him the best. He had such a nice face and such beautiful eyes, big and round as if he was always wondering about something. Mishka couldn't bear to part with him and so he wrote a letter to his mother.

"Dear Mum," he wrote. "Please let me keep a little puppy. He is so very sweet, he's brown all over except one ear which has a black spot on it, and I love him very much. If you let me keep him I promise to be very good and get good marks at school and I'll train him so he'll grow up to be a fine, big dog."

We named him Laddy. Mishka said he would buy a book about dogs and learn to train him properly.

* * *

Several days went by but there was no answer from Mishka's mother. When her letter finally came there was nothing in it about Laddy. She wrote telling us to come home at once because she was

worried about us. Mishka and I got ready to leave that day. He decided to take Laddy without waiting for permission, because after all it wasn't his fault if his mother hadn't received his letter.

"You can't take him with you," said Aunt Natasha. "Dogs aren't allowed in trains. If the conductor catches you, you'll have to pay a fine."

"The conductor won't see him," replied Mishka. "We'll hide him in my suit-case."

We emptied all Mishka's things into my knapsack, made several holes in his suit-case for Laddy to breathe through, put a piece of bread and some fried chicken inside in case he would get hungry and set off for the station. Aunt Natasha came to see us off.

All the way to the station Laddy was as quiet as a mouse. When Aunt Natasha went to buy our tickets we opened the bag to see what he was doing. There he was sitting quietly at the bottom blinking up at us.

"Good dog!" cried Mishka. "Clever boy! He knows how to behave."

We stroked him a little and shut the suit-case. When the train came Aunt Natasha saw us safely inside and said good-bye. We found an empty seat in a quiet corner of the compartment. The only other passenger there was an old woman who was dozing on the seat opposite. Mishka stuck the suit-case under the seat. The train started and we were off.

* * *

At first everything was quiet, but at the next station a crowd of passengers came in. A long-legged girl with pigtails ran up to our quiet corner shouting at the top of her voice:

"Aunt Nadya! Uncle Fedya! Here's a seat, come quick!"

Aunt Nadya and Uncle Fedya came down the aisle to our seat.

"Hurry up, hurry up!" she rattled. "Sit down quick. I'll sit next to Aunt Nadya, and Uncle Fedya can sit beside the boys."

"Hush, Lenchka. Don't make so much noise," said Aunt Nadya, and the two of them sat down next to the old lady on the opposite seat. Uncle Fedya shoved his suit-case under the seat and sat down beside us.

Lenchka clapped her hands and said: "Now, isn't that nice — three gentlemen on one side and three ladies on the other."

Mishka and I turned away and looked out of the window. For a while the only sounds were the clicking of the wheels and the engine puffing up in front. But suddenly there was a rustling noise under the seat and the sound of something scratching like a mouse.

"It's Laddy," whispered Mishka. "What if the conductor comes this way?"

"Perhaps he won't hear it?"

"But suppose he starts barking?"

The scratching continued. He must have been trying to scratch a hole in the suit-case.

"Oh, Auntie, Auntie, a mouse!" squealed that stupid Lenchka, picking up her feet.

"Nonsense," said her Aunt Nadya. "Whoever heard of mice in a train."

"Oh, but it is! Can't you hear?"

Mishka coughed as loudly as he could and kicked the case with his foot. For a minute or two Laddy was quiet, then he began to whine softly. Everyone looked surprised. But Mishka quickly ran his finger over the window-pane, making a squeaking noise on the glass. Uncle Fedya turned and looked at Mishka sternly.

"Stop that, young man!"

Just then someone farther down the carriage began to play the accordion and for a while you couldn't hear anything else. But soon the playing stopped.

"I say," Mishka whispered to me, "let's start singing."

"Oh, but what will they think of us," I objected.

"All right then, let's recite poetry."



"All right, you begin."

Something squeaked under the seat. Mishka coughed quickly and began in a hurry:

*Green the grassy meadow, bright the shining sun,
Gay the spring-time swallow; good cheer to everyone!*

The passengers laughed, and someone said: "It'll soon be autumn and here we have spring."

Lenochka giggled.

"Aren't they funny boys!" she said. "When they aren't imitating mice or making squeaky noises, they're reciting poetry."

But Mishka took no notice. As soon as he finished reciting one poem he went right on to the next, keeping time with his feet:

*Fresh and green my garden looks,
With lilac fragrance in the air,
With its cool and shady nooks,
With bird-cherry and linden fair.*

"There, now we have summer," joked the passengers. "The lilac is in bloom."

The next minute Mishka had plunged into the middle of winter:

*'Tis winter! The rejoicing peasant
Is seen again upon a sleigh.
His pony also finds it pleasant
To trot along the snow-clad way...*

After that he mixed everything up and autumn came right after winter:

*What a gloomy picture!
Clouds, and nothing more,
Rain from early morning,
Puddles by the door...*

Just then Laddy let out a pitiful whine and Mishka rushed on at the top of his voice:

*Why so early, Autumn,
With your chilly blight?
People's hearts are yearning
Still for warmth and light!*

The old lady who had been dozing on the opposite seat woke up, nodded her head and said: "True, child, true! Autumn has come far too soon. The little ones would like to play in the sunshine a little longer, but the summer is over. You recite very nicely, child, very nicely indeed."

She leaned over and stroked Mishka's head. Mishka kicked my foot under the seat to tell me to take over, but for the life of me I couldn't think of a single poem. The only thing that came into my head was a song, so I blurted it out as loudly as I could:

*My cosy little cottage,
Brand-new from floor to roof,
From maple floor and pine-wood wall
to shining shingle roof!..*

Uncle Fedya scowled. "Good God! Another elocutionist!"

Lenochka pouted and said: "Poof! Fancy reciting a silly thing like that!"

I rattled that song off twice and began another:

*I sit in my prison cell murky and dark,
An eagle, in irons — born free as a lark...*

"They really ought to put you in a cell, young man, for getting on people's nerves!" growled Uncle Fedya.

"Now, Fedya," said Aunt Nadya. "I see no reason why the boys shouldn't recite verse if they want to!"

But Uncle Fedya fidgeted and rubbed his forehead as if his

head ached. I stopped to catch my breath and Mishka carried on, this time slowly, with expression:

*Serene is the Ukrainian night.
The sky is clear, the stars are shining...*

The passengers roared with laughter. "Well, well, now we're in the Ukraine. Where will he take us next?"

More people came in at the next stop. "Listen to that youngster reciting!" they remarked to one another. "The journey won't be dull."

By now Mishka was in the Caucasus:

*The Caucasus lies at my feet, while alone
I stand at the edge of the dizzy abyss...*

He went nearly all around the world, but by the time he got to the Far North he was quite hoarse and it was my turn. I couldn't remember any more verses, so I started another song:

*All the world around I travelled,
Nowhere could I find my love...*

Lenochka burst out laughing. "That one only knows songs!" she squeaked.

"I can't help it if Mishka has recited all the poems," I said and began another song:

*It's a jolly young head on my shoulders,
But I doubt that I'll keep it there long...*

"You won't," said Uncle Fedya, "if you go on annoying people like this." He rubbed his forehead with a sigh, pulled the suitcase from under the seat and went out.

The train was approaching town. The passengers got up, gathered their belongings and moved towards the exit. We pulled out the suit-case and the knapsack and followed the others on to the platform. There was no sound from the suit-case.

"Look at that," said Mishka, "when it doesn't matter he keeps quiet, but when he ought to have kept quiet he made all that noise."

"Perhaps he's suffocated in there. We'd better take a look," I said. Mishka put the suit-case down and opened it. Laddy wasn't there! There were some books, note-pads, a towel, soap, a pair of horn-rimmed glasses, and knitting-needles, but no dog.

"Where's Laddy?" said Mishka.

"We've got the wrong bag!"

Mishka examined it. "So we have. Ours had holes in it, and besides it was dark brown, and this one is yellow. What an ass I am. I've gone and taken someone else's suit-case."

"Let's run back to the station, perhaps our bag is still under the seat." We ran back to the station. The train was still standing, but we had forgotten what carriage we had travelled in, so we ran through the whole train looking under the seats. But there was no sign of our suit-case.

"Someone must have taken it," I said.

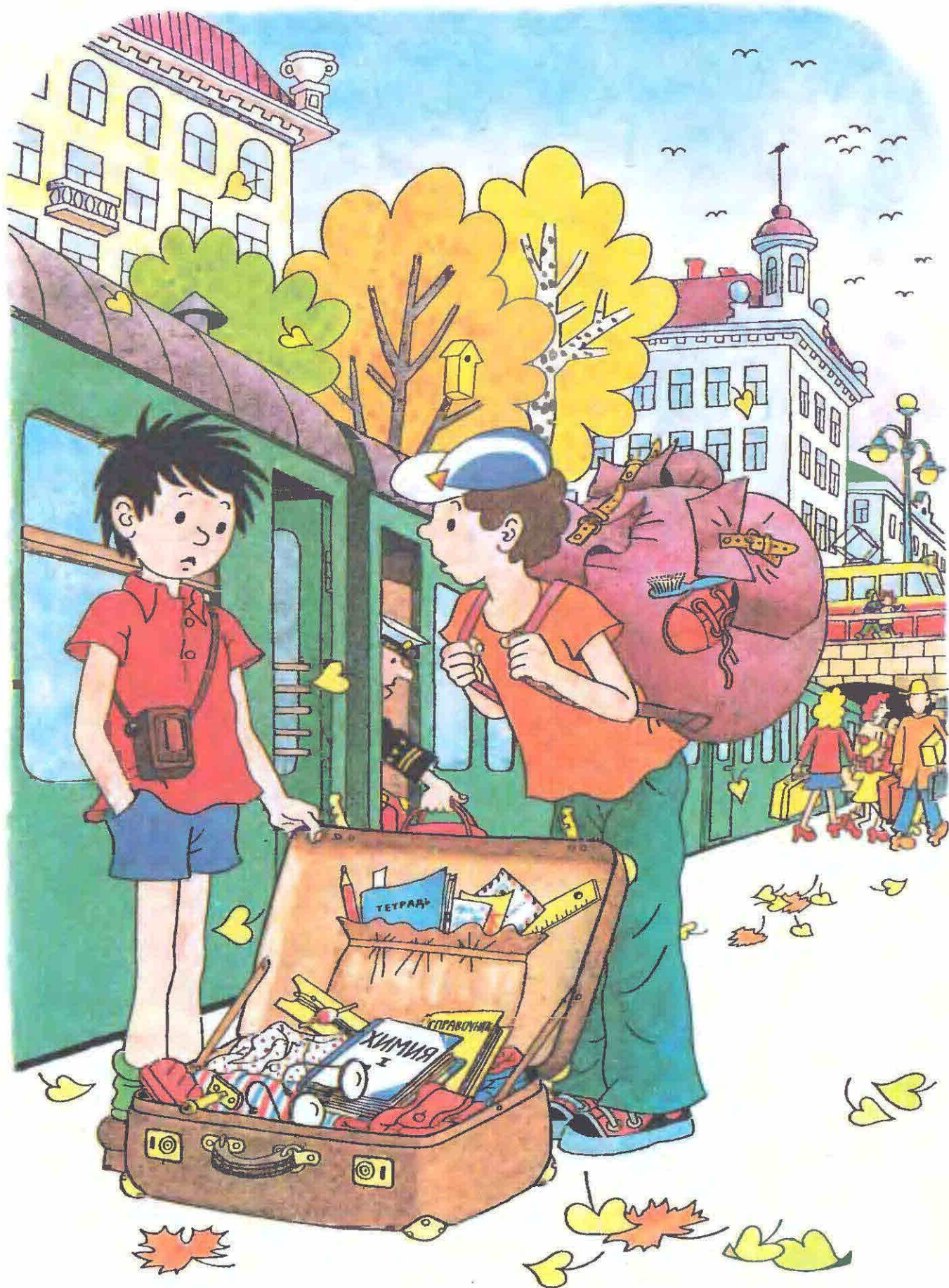
"Let's go through the carriages again," Mishka proposed.

We searched the train once more, but we didn't find any trace of our bag. We were wondering what to do when a conductor came up and chased us away.

We went home. I went to Mishka's place to get his things out of my knapsack. Mishka's mother saw that something was amiss.

"What's the trouble?" she asked.

"We've lost Laddy."



"Who is Laddy?"

"The puppy we brought from the country. Didn't you get my letter?"

"No, I didn't."

"Well, I wrote you all about it." And Mishka told his mother the whole story: what a wonderful pup Laddy was, how we had packed him in the suit-case and how the case got lost. By the time he finished he was in tears. I don't know what happened after that because I went home.

* * *

Next day Mishka came to my place and said:

"You know what? It turns out I'm a thief!"

"How's that?"

"Because I took someone's luggage."

"But you took it by mistake."

"I know. But someone might think I did it on purpose. Besides, the owner must be looking for it. I've got to get it back to him somehow."

"How will you find him?"

"I'll put up notices all over town. The owner will read them and come here for his suit-case."

"That's right," I said. "Let's write the notices now."

We cut up slips of paper and wrote in neat letters on each one:

"Found. A suit-case. In the train. Apply to Misha Kozlov. Peschanaya Street No. 8, Apartment 3."

After we had written out about twenty notices, I said:

"Now let's write a notice about Laddy. Someone may have taken our suit-case by mistake too."

"Yes, it must have been the man sitting next to us," said Mishka.

We cut up some more slips of paper and wrote another notice:

"Lost. A puppy in a suit-case. Please return to Misha Kozlov or write to Peschanaya Street No. 8, Apartment 3."

We wrote about twenty of these notices too and went out to paste them up. We stuck them on lamp-posts and on the walls. Very soon we had used up all our slips and went home to write some more. We were busy writing when the bell rang. Mishka ran to open the door. A strange woman came in.

"May I speak to Misha Kozlov?" she said.

"I'm Misha Kozlov," Mishka answered, looking surprised. How could the woman have known his name?

"I saw your notice," she said. "I lost a suit-case in the train."

"A suit-case?" said Mishka joyfully. "Just a moment, I'll go and get it." He ran into the next room and came back lugging the suit-case.

"Here it is."

The woman looked at it and shook her head. "No," she said. "That isn't mine."

"Not yours?" cried Mishka.

"Mine was bigger. Besides, it was black, and this one is yellow."

"Then I'm sorry, we haven't got yours. This is the only one we found. But if we do find yours we'll be very glad to return it to you."

The woman laughed.

"You're a funny pair. That's not the way to return lost property. You ought not to show the case to anyone who asks for it. You must first ask the person what sort of a suit-case he lost and what was in it. If he answers right, then you can give him the suit-case. Otherwise some dishonest person might take something that doesn't belong to him. There are all sorts of people, you know."

"We never thought of that," said Mishka.

"See how quickly our notices worked," said Mishka to me when the woman had gone. "We haven't finished pasting them all up yet and people are beginning to come already. At this rate we may find Laddy soon."

No one else came that day. But the next, the bell kept ringing all the time. Mishka and I were surprised. We never thought so many people lost suit-cases in trains. But the real owner didn't appear. All sorts of people came. There was a man who had lost his bag in a tram-car, and another who had left a box of nails in a bus, and an old woman who had a trunk stolen from her—they all came hoping to find their belongings in Mishka's place. They must have thought that if we had found one suit-case we must be able to find all sorts of other things.

"I wish someone would find my case," said Mishka.

"Yes, they could write a note to us at least, couldn't they? We would go for it ourselves."

* * *

One day Mishka and I were sitting at home when someone knocked at the door. Mishka ran to answer it and came back with a letter. He was all excited.

"Perhaps it's some news about Laddy," he said, examining the address scrawled on the envelope which was covered with all sorts of queer postmarks and stamps.

"It's not for us at all," he said finally. "It's for Mum. Some brilliant scholar must have written it, judging by the way the address is spelt. Two mistakes in Peschanaya Street. He's written Pechnaya Street instead of Peschanaya. The letter must have travelled all over town before it reached us. Mum! Here's a letter for you from some grammarian."

"I don't know any grammarians."

"Well, read it."

Mishka's mother opened the envelope and began reading to herself:

"Dear Mum. Please let me keep a little puppy. He is so very sweet, he's brown all over except one ear which has a black spot on it, and I love him very much..." "Why," says Mishka's mother. "It's your own letter."

I burst out laughing and looked at Mishka. He turned red as a beetroot and ran out of the room.

* * *

Mishka and I gave up hope of ever finding Laddy but Mishka couldn't forget him. He often talked about him.

"I wonder where he is now?" he would say. "What sort of a master has he got? I do hope he isn't a cruel man who beats dogs. Perhaps nobody took Laddy out of the suit-case and he died of hunger? I wouldn't even mind not getting him back so long as I knew he was alive and happy."

Before long the holidays were over and school started again. We were glad because we liked school and we were a bit tired of doing nothing.

On the first day of the term I got up very early, put on my new clothes and hurried off to Mishka's to wake him up. I met him on the stairs. He was coming to wake me up too.

We thought we would have the same teacher as last term, but when we came to school we found we had a new one. Vera Alexandrovna, our old teacher, had been transferred to another school. Our new teacher's name was Nadezhda Victorovna.

Nadezhda Victorovna gave us the timetable and told us what textbooks we would need, and then she called on each one of us so as to get acquainted. After that she asked us whether we had learned Pushkin's poem "Winter" the previous term. We said we had.

"Do you still remember it?" she asked.

The class was silent. I nudged Mishka and whispered: "You remember it, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Then raise your hand."

Mishka raised his hand.

"Very well, come out here and recite it," said the teacher.

Mishka went over and stood by her desk and began to recite with expression:

*'Tis winter! The rejoicing peasant
Is seen again upon a sleigh.
His pony also finds it pleasant
To trot along the snow-clad way...*

I noticed that the teacher was staring at him. Her forehead was puckered as if she were trying to remember something. Suddenly she stopped him and said:

"Just a moment. I remember now. Aren't you the boy who recited verses in the train this summer?"

Mishka turned red. "Yes, it was me," he said.

"Hm. Well, that will do now. Come to the common-room after class. I should like to talk to you."

"Shall I finish the poem?" Mishka asked.

"No. I can see that you know it quite well."

Mishka sat down and kicked my foot under the seat.

"It's her! She was with the girl Lenchka and the man who kept making nasty remarks about us. Uncle Fedya they called him. Remember?"

"Yes," I said. "I recognised her the minute you started reciting."

"What shall I do?" Mishka said, looking worried. "Why did she tell me to stay behind? I suppose she's going to tell me off for misbehaving that time in the train."

We were so worried that we hardly noticed how the lessons

ended. We were the last to leave the classroom. Mishka went to the common-room and I waited outside in the corridor. At last he came out.

"Well, what did she say?"

"It turns out it was her suit-case we took, or rather not hers but that man's, which amounts to the same thing. It's theirs all right, because she told me exactly what was in it, and it all fits. She asked me to bring it to them this evening. Here's the address."

He showed me a slip of paper with an address on it. We hurried home, took the suit-case and set out.

We found the house without much trouble and rang the bell. The door was opened by that girl Lenchka we had seen in the train.

She asked us whom we wanted, but we had forgotten our new teacher's name and we didn't know whom to ask for.

"Half a mo," said Mishka. "It must be written here on the address. Here it is: Nadezhda Victorovna."

"Oh," said the girl, "you've brought our suit-case! Come in." She showed us into a room and called:

"Aunt Nadya, Uncle Fedya, the boys have come with the suit-case."

Nadezhda Victorovna and Uncle Fedya came in. Uncle Fedya opened the case, snatched up his glasses and put them on his nose at once.

"My favourite spectacles, at last!" he cried, beaming all over. "I'm so glad I've found them. I couldn't get used to those new ones at all."

"We posted notices all over town as soon as we found we had taken the wrong suit-case by mistake," Mishka explained.

"Oh, I never read notices," said Uncle Fedya. "That just shows you. Next time I lose something I shall certainly read all the notices."

Just then a little dog came running into the room after Lenchka. He was brown all over except for one ear which was black.

"Look!" whispered Mishka.

The pup pricked up his ears and looked at us with his head cocked to one side.

"Laddy!" we cried.

Laddy gave a yelp of joy and rushed at us, jumping on us and barking excitedly. Mishka picked him up and hugged him.

"Laddy! Dear old Laddy. So you haven't forgotten us after all."

Laddy licked his face and Mishka kissed him right on the nose. Lenchka laughed and clapped her hands.

"He was in the suit-case we brought from the train. We must have taken yours by mistake. It's all Uncle Fedya's fault!"

"Yes," said Uncle Fedya. "It's all my fault. I took your suit-case and went out first, and you took mine, thinking it was yours."

They gave us back our suit-case, the one Laddy had travelled in. I could see that Lenchka didn't want to part with Laddy. She looked as though she were going to cry, but Mishka promised her that next year when Diana had puppies we would choose the prettiest one and bring it to her.

"Really and truly? You won't forget, will you?" she begged.

We said we would not forget. Then we said good-bye and left. Mishka carried Laddy who kept turning his head this way and that and taking an interest in everything he saw. Evidently Lenchka had kept him in the house all the time for fear he would run away.

When we came home we found several people waiting for us.

"Are you the boys who found a suit-case?" they asked.

"Yes," we said, "but there isn't any suit-case any more. We've returned it to the owner."

“Then why haven’t you taken down the notices? Making folks waste time for nothing.”

They grumbled some more and went away. That same day Mishka and I went for a walk and tore down all the notices.



THE TELEPHONE

One day Mishka and I saw a wonderful toy in a shop. It was a telephone set that worked just like a real one. There were two telephones and a coil of wire all packed neatly in a big wooden box. The salesgirl told us that you could use it between flats in the same house. You put one phone in one flat and the other in the flat next door and connect them with the wire.

Now, Mishka and I live in the same house, my flat is one floor above his, and we thought it would be great fun to be able to call each other up whenever we wanted to.

"Besides," said Mishka, "it's not an ordinary toy that gets broken and thrown out. It's a useful thing."

"Yes," I said. "Very useful. You can have a talk with your neighbour without going anywhere."

"Wonderful," said Mishka, all excited. "You can sit home and talk as much as you wish."

We decided to save up money to buy the telephones. For two weeks we didn't eat any ice-cream and we didn't go to the pictures, and by the end of two weeks we had enough money.

We hurried home from the shop with the box, put one of the telephones in my flat and the other in Mishka's and ran the wire through my window to Mishka's room.

"Now then," said Mishka. "Let's try it out. You run upstairs and wait for my call."

I dashed up to my place, picked up the receiver, and there was Mishka's voice already shouting:

"Hallo! Hallo!"

I yelled back "Hallo" at the top of my voice.

"Can you hear me?" shouted Mishka.

"Yes, I can hear you. Can you hear me?"

"Yes, I hear you. Isn't it wonderful! Do you hear me well?"

"Fine. What about you?"

"Me too. Ha! Ha! Do you hear me laughing?"

"Of course. Ha! Ha! Ha! Can you hear that?"

"Yes. Now listen, I'm coming up to you right away."

He came running in to my place and we hugged each other with joy.

"Aren't you glad we have a phone? Isn't it grand?"

"Yes," I said.

"Now, I'll go back and call you up again."

He ran back. The phone rang again. I picked up the receiver.

"Hallo!"

"Hallo!"

"Do you hear me?"

"I hear you perfectly."

"Do you?"

"Yes, I do."

"Me too. Now let's have a talk."

"Yes, let's. What shall we talk about?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Are you glad we bought the telephone?"

"Very glad."

"It would be awful if we hadn't bought it, wouldn't it?"

"Terrible."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"Why don't you say something?"

"Say something yourself."

"I don't know what to say," said Mishka. "It's always like that. When you need to talk you don't know what to say, but when you know you mustn't talk you can't stop."

I said:

"I know what: I'll hang up and think for a while, and when I think of something to say I'll call you."

"All right."

I hung up and started to think. Suddenly the phone rang. I picked up the receiver.

"Well, have you thought of something?" asked Mishka.

"Not yet, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

"Then what did you ring up for?"

"I thought you had thought of something."

"I would have phoned if I had."

"I thought you mightn't think of it."

"Think I'm a donkey or what?"

"Did I say you're a donkey?"

"What did you say then?"

"Nothing, I said you were not a donkey."

"Oh, all right, that's enough about donkeys. We'd better do our lessons."

"Yes, so we had."

I hung up and sat down to do my lessons. I had just opened the book when the phone rang.

"Listen. I'm going to sing and play the piano over the phone."

"Go ahead."

I heard a crackling noise, then the thumping of a piano and suddenly a voice that did not sound a bit like Mishka's sang:

*Whither have you fled,
Golden days of my youth?..*

What's this, I wondered. Where could Mishka have learned to sing like that?

Just then Mishka came in, grinning from ear to ear.

"You thought it was me singing? It's the gramophone! Let me listen too."

I handed him the receiver. He listened for a while, then suddenly he dropped the receiver in a great hurry and dashed downstairs. I put the receiver to my ear and heard an awful buzzing and hissing.

The record must have run down.

I sat down again to do my lessons. The telephone rang. I took off the receiver.

"Bow-wow!" sounded in my ear.

"What're you barking for?"

"It's not me, it's Laddy. Can you hear him biting at the receiver?"

"Yes."

"I'm pushing the receiver against his nose and he's gnawing at it."

"He'll chew up your telephone if you're not careful."

"Oh, nothing will happen to it, it's made of iron. Ouch! You bad dog, get down! How dare you bite me! Take that! (Bow-wow!) He bit me, did you hear that?"

"Yes, I heard," I said.

I sat down again to do my lessons, but the next minute the telephone rang again. This time there was a loud buzzing in the receiver.

"What's that?"

"A fly."

"Where is it?"

"I'm holding it in front of the receiver and it's buzzing and whirring its wings."

Mishka and I telephoned each other all day long. We invented all sorts of tricks: we sang, we shouted, we roared, we miaowed, we whispered — and you could hear everything. It



was pretty late before I finally finished my lessons. I decided to call up Mishka before going to bed.

I rang up but there was no answer.

What could have happened, I wondered. Had his telephone stopped working already?

I called again, but there was no answer. I ran downstairs and, would you believe it, there was Mishka taking his telephone to pieces! He had pulled out the battery, taken the bell apart and was beginning to unscrew the receiver.

"Here!" I said. "What are you busting the telephone for?"

"I'm not. I'm only taking it apart to see how it's made. I'll put it together again."

"You won't be able to. You don't know how."

"Who says I don't? It's easy."

He unscrewed the receiver, took out some bits of metal and started to pry open a round metal plate inside. The plate flew off and some black powder spilt out. Mishka got frightened and tried to put the powder back into the receiver.

"Now you've gone and done it!" I said.

"That's nothing. I'll put it together again in a jiffy!"

He worked and worked but it wasn't as easy as he thought, because the screws were very tiny and it was hard to get them into place. At last he had everything put back except a small piece of metal and two screws.

"What's that thing for?" I asked him.

"Oh dear, I forgot to put it in," said Mishka. "How silly of me! It should have been screwed inside. I'll have to take it apart again."

"All right," I said. "I'm going home. Call me up when you've finished."

I went home and waited. I waited and waited but there was no call, so I went to bed.

Next morning the telephone rang so loudly that I thought

the house was on fire. I sprang out of bed, snatched up the receiver and yelled:

"Hallo!"

"What are you grunting like that for?" said Mishka.

"I'm not grunting."

"Stop grunting and talk properly!" shouted Mishka.

"But I am talking properly. Why should I grunt anyway?"

"Don't be a clown. I won't believe you've got a pig there anyway."

"But there isn't any pig here, I'm telling you!" I shouted, getting angry too.

Mishka said nothing.

A minute later he burst into my room.

"What do you mean by making pig noises over the phone?"

"I wasn't doing anything of the kind."

"I heard you quite plainly."

"What should I want to make pig noises for?"

"How do I know? All I know is there was someone grunting into my ear. You go downstairs and try it yourself."

I went down to his place, rang him up and shouted:

"Hallo!"

"Grunt, grunt, grunt, grunt!" was all I heard in reply.

I saw what had happened and I ran back to tell Mishka.

"It's all your doing," I said. "You've gone and busted the telephone."

"How's that?"

"You spoiled something in the receiver when you took it apart."

"I must have put it back the wrong way," said Mishka. "I'll have to fix it."

"How will you fix it?"

"I'll take yours apart and see how it's made."

"Oh no, you won't! I'm not going to let you ruin my telephone too."

"You needn't be afraid. I'll be very careful. If I don't mend it we won't be able to use the phone at all."

I had to give in and he got busy at once. He tinkered with it for a long time and when he had finished "fixing" it, it stopped working altogether. It didn't even grunt any more.

"What are we going to do now?" I said.

"I'll tell you what," said Mishka. "Let's go back to the shop and ask them to repair it for us."

We went to the shop, but they said they didn't repair telephones and they couldn't tell us where we could get ours repaired. We felt pretty miserable all that day. Then Mishka had an idea.

"We are donkeys! We can telegraph to each other."

"How?"

"You know, dots and dashes. The bell still works. We can use that. A short bell can be a dot, and a long bell will be a dash. We can learn the Morse code and send messages to each other."

We got hold of the Morse code and started studying it. A dot and a dash stands for A, a dash and three dots for B, a dot and two dashes for C, and so on. We soon learned the whole alphabet and began sending messages. It went pretty slowly at first, but after a while we were tapping away on our bell like real telegraphers. It was even more exciting than a telephone. But it didn't last long. One morning I called Mishka, but there was no answer. He must be sleeping, I thought. So I called later, but there was still no answer. I went down to him and knocked at his door. Mishka opened it for me.

"You don't need to knock any more. You can ring."

He pointed to the button on the door.

"What't that?"

"A bell."

"Go on!"

"Yes, an electric door-bell."

"Where did you get it?"

"I made it myself."

"How?"

"I made it out of the telephone."

"What?"

"Yes. I took the bell out of the phone, and the button as well. I took the battery out too. Got something useful now instead of just a toy."

"But you had no right to take the telephone apart," I said.

"Why not? I took mine apart, not yours."

"Yes, but the telephone belongs to both of us. If I had known you were going to take it to pieces I wouldn't have chipped in with you and bought it. I don't need a telephone that doesn't work."

"You don't need a telephone at all. We don't live so far from each other. If you want to talk to me you can come downstairs."

"I never want to talk to you again," I said and walked out.

I was so angry with him I didn't talk to him for three whole days. I was very lonely all by myself, so I took my telephone apart and made a door-bell out of it too. But I didn't do it the way Mishka did. I made mine properly. I put the battery on a shelf near the door and ran a wire from it along the wall to the bell and the button. I screwed the push-button in properly so it didn't hang on one nail like Mishka's. Even Mum and Dad praised me for doing such a neat job.

I went down to tell Mishka about my bell.

I pressed the button on his door, but nobody answered.

I pressed it several times but I didn't hear it ring. So I knocked.

Mishka opened the door.

"What's wrong with your bell? Doesn't it work?"

"No, it's out of order."

"What's the trouble?"

"I took the battery apart."

"You what?!"

"Yes, I wanted to see what it was made of."

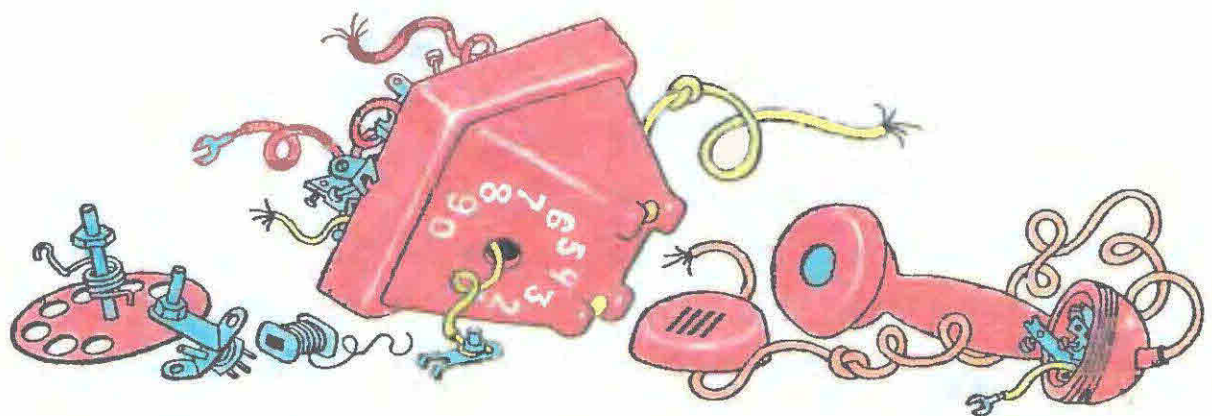
"Well, what are you going to do now without a telephone or a bell?" I asked him.

"Oh, I'll manage somehow," he answered with a sigh.

I went home feeling puzzled. What makes Mishka do such things? Why does he have to break everything? I even felt quite sorry for him.

That night I couldn't sleep for a long time, I was thinking about our telephone and the bell we had made out of it. Then I thought about electricity and where the electricity inside the batteries came from.

Everyone else was fast asleep but I lay awake thinking about all these things. After a while I got up, switched on the light, took my battery off the shelf and broke it open. There was some sort of liquid inside with a small black stick wrapped in a piece of cloth dipped in it. So that was it! The electricity came from that liquid. I went back to bed and fell asleep at once.



Fireworks

You can't imagine how busy Mishka and I were before New Year. We had been preparing for it for ages, gluing paper chains for the tree, cutting out little flags and making all sorts of decorations. Everything would have been fine, if only Mishka hadn't got hold of a book called *Chemistry Can Be Fun* and read all about making fireworks.

After that we didn't have a moment's peace. He spent all day pounding sulphur and sugar in a mortar, making aluminium filings and burning test mixtures. The house was full of smoke and foul-smelling suffocating gases. The neighbours got angry, and all Mishka's attempts to produce fireworks were a failure.

But Mishka was not downhearted. He even invited lots of the kids from our class to a New Year's Eve party and boasted that he would have a firework display there.

"You know what they're like!" he said. "They sparkle like silver and burst into sprays of fire in all directions."

"What have you done?" I said to Mishka. "You've invited them on New Year's Eve, but there won't be any fireworks."

"Oh, yes there will! There's plenty of time before then. I'll get everything done, just you see!"

The day before New Year's Eve he came to me and said:

"It's time we went and got our trees, or there won't be one for the party."

"It's too late today," I replied. "Let's go tomorrow."

"But tomorrow we'll have to decorate the tree."

"Never mind," I said. "We'll go and get them in the afternoon, after school, and decorate them in the evening."

We had already decided to get our trees from Gorelkin, where we spent the summer at Aunt Natasha's. Aunt Natasha's husband was a forester and he had told us in the summer that we could have fir trees from the forest. I had even asked Mum well in advance for permission to go to the forest.

The next day I went to Misha's house after lunch and found him pounding away at his firework mixture in a mortar.

"You should have done that earlier," I said. "It's time to go now, and here you are messing about with that!"

"I did do it earlier, only I don't think I put enough sulphur in. They hiss and smoke, but don't burn."

"Forget about it. They won't work anyway."

"I think they will now. I just need to put more sulphur in. Give me that aluminium saucepan on the window-sill there."

"I can't see a saucepan. Only a frying pan," I said.

"A frying pan? That used to be a saucepan, silly. Let me have it."

I handed him the saucepan, and he began filing away at the edges.

"So it's thanks to you that this saucepan has turned into a frying pan, is it?" I asked.

"Well, yes," said Mishka. "I filed away at it until it looked like a frying pan. But never mind, frying pans are useful things too."

"What did your Mum have to say about that?"

"Nothing. She hasn't seen it yet."

"And what about when she does see it?"

"Oh, well. So she sees it, and that's that. I'll buy her a new saucepan when I grow up."

"That's a long time to wait, until you grow up," I said.

"Never mind."

Mishka had a heap of filings by now. He shook the powder out of the mortar, poured some glue on it and mixed it with the filings into a putty-like dough. Out of this dough he rolled long sausages on pieces of wire and lay them on a piece of wood to dry.

"There we are," he said. "They just need to dry, then they'll be ready. Only we must hide them from Laddy."

"Why?"

"Or else he'll eat them."

"Eat them? Surely dogs don't eat fireworks?"

"Maybe some don't, but Laddy does. Once I left them to dry and when I came back he was gnawing them. He must have thought they were sweets."

"Hide them in the stove then. It's warm there, and Laddy won't be able to get at them."

"I can't put them in there. Once I hid them in the stove, then Mum came in and lit it and they all burnt. I'd better put them on the cupboard," Mishka said.

He climbed onto a chair and put the fireworks on the cupboard.

"You know what he's like," said Mishka. "He's always taking my things. Remember when he hid my left shoe and we couldn't find it anywhere. I had to wear my felt boots for three days, until we bought a new pair of shoes. It was warm outside, and there I was wearing felt boots as if it was winter. When we bought the new shoes, we threw away the odd one, because one shoe is no good to anybody. But as soon as we threw it away, we found the lost one. Laddy had put it under the kitchen stove. So then we threw that away too. If we hadn't thrown the first one away, we wouldn't have got rid of the second one either, but since we had thrown the first one away, we threw

that one out too. So in the end we threw both of them out."

"Stop jabbering and get your things on," I said. "It's time we got going."

Mishka did as he was told. We took an axe and hurried off to the station. A train had just left, so we had to wait for the next one. Never mind, it came at last and we got on it. Finally we reached Gorelkino, got out and went straight to the forester. He gave us a chitty for two fir trees and told us where we were allowed to cut them down, then off we went into the forest. There were hundreds of fir trees, but Mishka managed to find fault with all of them.

"If I've come all this way, I want the best fir tree there is, or it's not worth it," he kept saying.

We went on right into the heart of the forest.

"We must cut them down quickly," I said. "It'll start getting dark soon."

"But there's nothing worth cutting down!"

"What about that nice fir tree over there?" I said.

Mishka examined it carefully from all sides and said:

"It's not bad, of course, but not good enough. In fact it's not good at all. It's too stubby."

"What do you mean — stubby?"

"It's got a very short top. I wouldn't take it if you paid me to."

We found another fir tree.

"This one limps," said Mishka.

"What do you mean — limps?"

"It just limps. It's got a crooked leg, see?"

"A crooked leg?"

"Well, trunk."

"Trunk! Then why not say so!"

We found another fir tree.

"It's bald," said Mishka.

"Bald yourself! How can a fir tree be bald?"

"Of course it can! See how thin its needles are. There are bald patches all over. It's more like a broomstick than a fir tree!"

And so it went on, the tree was either bald, or lame, or had something else wrong with it.

"It's no good listening to you, or we'll be here all night," I said.

I found a tree that looked alright, cut it down and gave the axe to Mishka.

"Get a move on, it's time we went back."

He went on looking all over the place. I begged him and shouted at him, but it was no good. At last he found one he liked, cut it down, and we set off back to the station. We walked for ages, but still didn't reach the edge of the forest.

"Perhaps we've come the wrong way?" said Misha.

So we went in the opposite direction, but still we couldn't get out of the forest. It began to get dark. We kept changing direction, until we hadn't the faintest idea where we were.

"Now look what you've done," I said.

"What have I done? It's not my fault that it gets dark so early."

"You wasted all that time choosing a tree. And messing about at home. Now we'll have to spend the night here because of you."

"We can't!" exclaimed Mishka in a fright. "The others are coming round tonight. We must find the path."

Soon it was really dark. The moon began to shine. Black tree trunks loomed around us like fearsome giants. Wolves seemed to lurk behind every tree. We stopped, afraid to go any further.

"Let's shout!" said Mishka.

So we shouted together:

"Halloo-oo-oo!"

"Halloo-oo-oo!" replied the echo.

"Halloo-oo-oo! Halloo-oo-oo!" we shouted again with all our might.

"Halloo-oo-oo! Halloo-oo-oo!" the echo repeated.

"Perhaps we'd better not shout," said Mishka.

"Why not?"

"The wolves might hear and come after us."

"Let's just walk straight ahead," I said. "Or we'll never get to the road."

We set off once more. Mishka kept glancing round and asking:

"What shall we do if the wolves attack us? We haven't got a gun."

"Throw burning logs at them," I said.

"But where shall we get them from?"

"Light a bonfire."

"Do you have any matches?"

"No."

"Can they climb trees?"

"Who?"

"Wolves."

"Wolves? No, they can't."

"Then if they attack us, we'll climb up a tree and stay there until morning."

"Don't be silly! You couldn't stay up a tree until morning."

"Why not?"

"Because you'd get frozen stiff and fall down."

"Why would you get frozen stiff? We're not cold now."

"We're not cold because we're moving, but you just try sitting still up a tree and you'll soon get frozen."

"But why sit still?" Mishka said. "You could sit and swing your legs."

"You'd get tired, swinging your legs all night up a tree."

We were pushing our way through thick bushes, stumbling on tree stumps and floundering up to our knees in snow. The going was getting harder and harder.

We were worn out.

"Let's leave the fir trees," I said.

"No," said Mishka. "The boys and girls are coming to my place tonight. I must have a tree."

"We must concentrate on getting out of here," I said. "Forget about the fir trees."

"Wait a minute," said Mishka. "One of us should go on ahead and tread down a path so it's easier for the other one. We'll take it in turns."

We stopped and had a rest. Then Mishka went on in front, and I followed him. We walked for ages. I stopped to move my fir tree onto the other shoulder. When I was about to start again, I couldn't see Misha. He and his fir tree had vanished into thin air.

"Mishka!" I yelled.

There was no reply.

"Mishka! Where are you?"

Still no reply.

I set off cautiously and suddenly saw a steep slope so close that I almost tumbled down it. Something dark stirred at the bottom.

"Is that you, Mishka?"

"Yes! I must have fallen down the slope!"

"Why didn't you answer? I've been shouting my head off..."

"You wouldn't feel like answering, if you'd hurt your leg!"

I climbed down to him, and suddenly saw the path. Mishka was sitting right in the middle of it, rubbing his knee.

"What's the matter?"

"I banged my knee. I fell on it."

"Does it hurt?"

"Yes. I'll sit here for a bit."

"Alright, let's both sit down for a bit," I said.

So we sat in the snow until we started to feel the cold.

"We'll get frostbite if we're not careful! Let's start walking along the path, eh? It's bound to take us somewhere, to the station, or the

forester, or some village. We can't just freeze to death in the snow."

Mishka tried to get up, but gave a groan and sat down again.

"I can't," he said.

"What shall we do? I know, I'll carry you on my shoulders," I said.

"You couldn't carry me all the way, could you?"

"Well, I'll have a try."

Mishka stood up and started climbing onto my back.

After a lot of wheezing he finally made it. He weighed a ton! I was almost bent double.

"Come on then, carry me!" said Mishka.

I took a few paces, stumbled and fell down into the snow.

"Ouch!" Misha cried. "I've hurt my leg and you go throwing me down on the ground!"

"I didn't mean to!"

"You shouldn't have said you'd carry me, if you couldn't."

"You're nothing but a load of trouble!" I told him. "First you mess about with fireworks, then you spend all day choosing a fir tree, and now you've gone and hurt your knee... Now we'll never get home."

"You can get home!"

"How can I?"

"Go on your own. It's all my fault. I persuaded you to come here for a fir tree."

"But I can't leave you here alone."

"Why not? I'll find my own way back. I'll have a sit-down till my leg feels better, then set off again."

"Oh, shut up! I'm not going anywhere without you. We came together and we'll go back together. Let's think of a bright idea."

"What bright idea?"

"How about making a sledge? We've got an axe."

"How can you make a sledge out of an axe?"

"Not out of an axe, stupid! Cut some wood and make a sledge out of the wood."

"But we haven't got any nails."

"Let's just think," I said.

So I put on my thinking cap. Mishka just sat there in the snow. I dragged over a fir tree.

"Sit on this or you'll catch your death," I said.

He did as he was told. Then suddenly I had an idea.

"Hey, Misha," I said. "Say I pull you along on this tree?"

"What do you mean, on this tree?"

"Well, you just sit on it and I'll pull it along by the trunk. Hold tight!"

I took hold of the trunk and began pulling. What a brilliant idea! The snow on the path was firm and smooth. The tree slid along it easily like a sledge carrying Mishka.

"That's great!" I said. "Here, you hold the axe."

I gave him the axe. Mishka settled down comfortably and I dragged him along the path. We soon reached a clearing and saw some lights.

"It's the station, Mishka!" I said.

There was the sound of a train coming in the distance.

"Quick!" said Mishka. "Or we'll miss the train."

I pulled like mad with Mishka shouting:

"Get a move on! We'll be too late!"

The train was drawing into the station. We just made it! We ran up to a carriage and I pushed Mishka on. The train moved off. I jumped onto the footboard, pulling the fir tree in after me. The passengers began to complain that the tree was prickly.

"Where did you get such a tatty-looking tree?" asked one of them.

We told them about our adventures in the forest, and they all felt sorry for us. One woman sat Mishka down on a seat, took off his boot and examined his leg.



"It's nothing serious," she said. "Just a bruise."

"I thought I must have broken it, because it hurt so much," said Mishka.

"Never mind, you'll recover for your wedding day!" someone said.

Everybody laughed. We were each given a pasty by one woman and a sweet by another. This cheered us up a lot, because we were starving by then.

"What are we going to do?" I said. "We've only got one tree for the two of us."

"Give it to me for today," said Mishka. "And that's that."

"What do you mean — that's that? I dragged it all through the forest and carried you on it, and now I have to give it away."

"Give it to me just for today. Tomorrow I'll let you have it back."

"That's great!" I said. "Everyone enjoys themselves, and I don't even have a tree!"

"But I've invited everyone round today," said Mishka. "What can I do without a tree?"

"Well, you could show them your fireworks. They've seen a tree before, haven't they?"

"The fireworks probably won't work. I've made them about twenty times already, and they never work. Just smoke the place out."

"But perhaps they will work this time."

"No, I won't even mention them. Perhaps the others will have forgotten about them."

"No, they won't have. You shouldn't have boasted about them in the first place."

"If I had a tree," said Mishka, "I'd make up some poem about fireworks and get out of it somehow, but now I just don't know what to do."

"No," I said. "I can't give you the tree. I've never ever had a New Year without a tree."

"Be a sport and help me out. You've helped me out lots of times."

"So I'm supposed to help you out all the while, am I?"

"This is the last time! I'll give you anything you like in return. You know what I've got. Choose anything you like."

"Alright," I said. "In that case give me Laddy."

Mishka turned away and said nothing for a long time. He was thinking. Then he gave me a mournful look and said:

"No, I can't give you Laddy."

"But you said 'anything you like' and now..."

"I'd forgotten about Laddy. I was thinking about things, when I said that. And Laddy isn't a thing, he's alive."

"So what? He's just an ordinary dog! Hasn't even got a pedigree."

"It's not his fault that he hasn't got a pedigree! He loves me all the same. When I'm not at home, he thinks about me, and when I come in, he runs up and wags his tail... No, I just can't. I don't care if they do laugh at me. I wouldn't part with him for all the money in the world."

"Alright then," I said. "You can have the tree for nothing."

"Why for nothing? I promised you something, so you must have something. How about that magic lantern with the pictures? You've always wanted a magic lantern."

"No, I don't want your magic lantern. Just take the tree."

"But you had all that trouble getting it. Why give it away for nothing?"

"Why not? I don't want anything."

"And I don't want anything for nothing either."

"Well, it's not really for nothing," I said. "It's because we're friends. Friendship is worth more than a magic lantern! Let's share the fir tree between us."

While we were talking, the train drew in at the station. We hadn't noticed the time pass. Mishka's knee had stopped hurting. He only hobbled a bit when we got out of the train.

I went home first, so that Mum wouldn't be worried, then hurried over to Mishka's to decorate our tree.

The tree was already standing in the middle of the room. Mishka was covering up the bare patches with green paper. We didn't have time to finish decorating it, before the boys and girls began to arrive.

"Fancy inviting us to a New Year's Eve party and not even decorating the tree properly," they said.

So then we told them about our adventures, and Mishka even pretended we had been attacked by wolves and escaped by climbing up a tree. The children didn't believe him and laughed at us. Mishka tried to convince them, then gave up and started laughing himself.

Mishka's mother and father went to their neighbours to see New Year in, but my Mum made a big cake with jam for us and lots of other nice things, so that we enjoyed ourselves as well.

So we were all on our own and could romp around to our heart's content. I've never heard such a din in all my life. Mishka was the noisiest of all. I knew why he was making such a racket, of course. He didn't want anyone to remember about the fireworks, so he kept thinking up new pranks.

Then we switched on the coloured lights on the tree, and suddenly the clock began to chime midnight.

"Hurray!" shouted Mishka. "Happy New Year!"

"Hurray!" cried the boys and girls. "Happy New Year! Hurray!"

Mishka thought everything would be alright now and shouted:

"Sit down at the table, everyone. We'll have tea and cake."

"But what about the firework display?" someone called out.

"The fireworks?" Mishka said anxiously. "Oh, they're not ready."

"But you promised there would be fireworks when you invited us... It was a trick!"

"No, it wasn't a trick, honestly! There are some fireworks, but they're still damp."

"Let's have a look at them. They might be dry by now. Perhaps you haven't really got any at all?"

Mishka reluctantly climbed up to the cupboard and almost fell down holding the sausages. They had dried and turned into hard sticks.

"They're as dry as can be!" cried the boys and girls. "Why did you say they weren't?"

"They only look dry," Mishka tried to justify himself. "They really need much longer. They won't light properly."

"We'll soon see about that!" cried the boys and girls.

They grabbed the sticks, twisted the wire into a loop and hung them on the tree.

"Wait a minute!" Mishka shouted. "We must test one first."

But no one took any notice of him.

The children fetched some matches and lit all the fireworks at once. There was a loud hissing as if the room was full of snakes. The children dashed out of the way. Suddenly the fireworks flared up, then began to sparkle and burst into shining sprays. It was a real firework display! No, even better than that! It was like the Aurora Borealis, or an erupting volcano! The whole tree was a mass of glittering silver sprays. We stood and stared, enthralled.

After a while they burnt out and the room was filled with foul-smelling suffocating smoke. The children began to cough and sneeze and rub their eyes. We all crowded into the corridor, but the smoke followed us. The boys and girls began to put on their coats and go home.

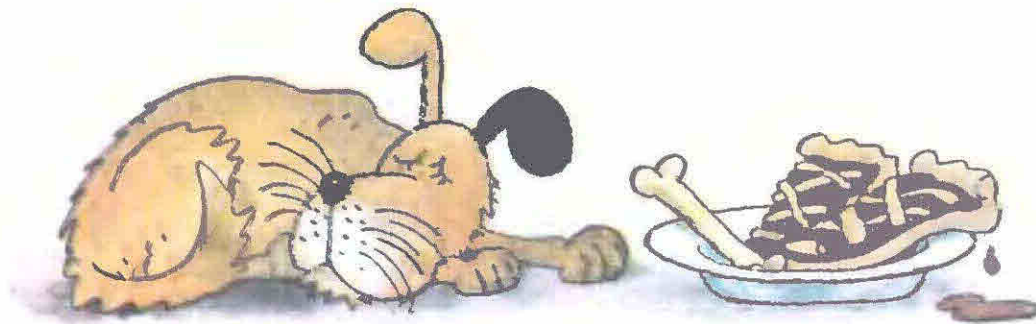
"Hey, what about the tea and cake, everyone?" cried Mishka.

No one took any notice. They were too busy coughing, putting on their coats and going home. Mishka grabbed hold of me, took off my hat and shouted:

"Don't you go too! Be a sport! Stay and have some tea and cake!"

In the end there was just Mishka and me. The smoke gradually cleared, but you still couldn't go into the room. Mishka tied a wet handkerchief round his mouth, fetched the pie and took it into the kitchen.

The kettle had already boiled, so we sat down to have tea and cake. The cake was delicious, with jam, only it tasted of smoke from the fireworks too. But that didn't matter. Mishka and me had one half, and Laddy gobbled up the other.



Rat-a-Tat-Tat!

Mishka, Kostya and I went to the country this summer a day before the rest of our Pioneer group moved out. We had been sent on ahead to put the place in order before the others arrived. We had begged Vitya, our Pioneer leader, to let us go because we wanted to get out to the country as soon as possible.

Vitya came along with us. They were just finishing with the cleaning when we arrived, and we set to work at once to hang pictures and coloured posters on the walls and cut out coloured paper flags which we threaded in chains and hung under the ceiling. Then we picked lots of meadow flowers and arranged them in bouquets on the window-sills. By the time we were finished the place looked very nice indeed.

In the evening Vitya went back to town. Marya Maximovna, the caretaker who lived in a little cottage next door to our house, came and offered to put us up for the night. She thought we would be afraid to sleep by ourselves in the empty house. But Mishka told her we weren't afraid of anything.

When Marya Maximovna had gone, we put on the samovar and sat on the door-step to rest while it boiled up.

How lovely it was out there in the country! There were tall rowan-trees next to the house and a row of great lime-trees, very tall and very old, over by the fence. The branches of the lime-trees were dotted with crows' nests and the crows circled over the trees cawing loudly all the time. The air was filled

with the humming of cockchafers. They whizzed by in all directions. Some flew smack into the wall and dropped to the ground. Mishka collected the stunned ones and put them in a box.

The sun sank behind the forest and the clouds glowed red as if they were on fire. It was so beautiful that if I had my paints with me I would surely have painted a picture then and there with the pink clouds on top and our samovar below and the smoke curling up from our samovar chimney like the smoke from a ship's funnel.

After a while the red glow went out of the sky and the clouds began to look like grey mountains. Everything looked so different that we began to think we had landed by some magic in a strange country.

When the samovar boiled, we took it inside, lit the lamp and sat down to drink tea. Moths flew in through the open windows and danced round and round the lamp. There was something strange and exciting about sitting there drinking tea by ourselves in the quiet, empty house, listening to the faint hissing of the samovar on the table.

After tea we prepared for bed. Mishka locked the door and fastened the handle with a bit of string.

"What's that for?" we asked him.

"So the robbers shouldn't get in."

We laughed at him. "Don't be afraid, there aren't any robbers around here," we told him.

"I'm not afraid," he said. "But you never know what might happen. We'd better close the shutters too."

We laughed at him, but we closed the shutters to be on the safe side. We pushed our beds together so we could talk without shouting across the room.

Mishka said he would sleep in the middle.

"You want the robbers to kill us first, is that it?" said Kostya. "All right, we're not afraid."

But even that didn't satisfy him. Before he got into bed he brought in a chopper from the kitchen and hid it under his pillow. Kostya and I nearly burst our sides laughing.

"See you don't chop our heads off by mistake!" we told him. "You might take us for robbers in the dark."

"You needn't be afraid," said Mishka. "I won't make any mistakes."

We blew out the lamp, curled up under the blankets and began telling each other stories in the dark. Mishka was first, I was next, and when it was Kostya's turn he told us such a long and frightening story that Mishka hid his head under the blanket with terror. Kostya started knocking at the wall to scare Mishka some more and said that someone was at the door. He kept it up for so long that I got a bit scared myself and I told him to stop it.

At last Kostya stopped fooling. Mishka calmed down and went to sleep. But for some reason Kostya and I couldn't fall asleep. It was so quiet we could hear Mishka's beetles rustling in the box. The room was as dark as the darkest cellar because the shutters were closed. We lay for a long time listening to the silence and whispering to each other in the darkness. At last a faint glimmer of light came through the shutters. Day was breaking. I must have dozed off because I woke up with a start to hear someone knocking.

Rat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

I woke Kostya.

"There's someone at the door."

"Who could it be?"

"Sh! Listen!"

For a minute all was silent. Then it came again: Rat-tat!

"Yes, someone is knocking," said Kostya. "Whoever can it be?"

We waited, holding our breath. There was no more knocking and we began to think we had dreamed it.

And then we heard it again: Rat-tat! Rat-tat!

"Sh-sh," whispered Kostya. "Let's pretend we don't hear it. Perhaps they'll go away."

We waited for a while, and then the tapping came again: Rat-tat!

"Oh dear, they're still there!" said Kostya.

"Perhaps it's someone from town?" I said.

"Who would come at this hour? No, let's lie still and wait. If they knock again, we'll ask who it is."

We waited, but no one knocked.

"Must have gone away," said Kostya.

We were just beginning to feel better when the tapping sounded again: Rat-a-tat-tat!

I started and sat up in bed. "Come on," I said. "Let's go and ask who it is."

We crept over to the door.

"Who's there?" said Kostya.

There was no answer.

"Who's there?" Kostya repeated, louder this time.

Silence.

"Who's there?"

No answer. "Must have gone away," I said.

We went back. No sooner had we reached our beds than: Rat-tat! Rat-a-tat-tat!

We dashed to the door. "Who's there?"

Silence.

"Is he deaf, or what?" said Kostya. We stood listening. We thought we heard something rustling outside.

"Who is it?"

Nobody answered.

We went back to bed and sat up holding our breath. Suddenly we heard a rustling on the roof above our heads, and then something went crash-bang on the tin roof.

"They've gone and climbed on to the roof!" said Kostya.

Bang! Crash! Bang! This time the noise came from the far side of the roof.

"Sounds as if there were two of them," I said. "What are they doing on the roof, I wonder."

We jumped out of bed and closed the door to the next room which led to the attic. We pushed the dining-table against the door and another smaller table against that and then a bed. But the banging on the roof continued, now on one side, now on the other, now both together. There seemed to be three of them up there. And then someone started knocking at the door again.

"Perhaps somebody is doing it just to frighten us," I said.

"We ought to go out and jump on them and give them a good hiding for keeping us awake," said Kostya.

"They're more likely to give us a good hiding. There may be twenty of them out there!"

All this time Mishka was sleeping soundly. He hadn't heard a thing.

"Perhaps we'd better wake him," I suggested.

"No. Let him sleep," said Kostya. "You know what a coward he is. He'd be scared out of his wits."

As for us, we were ready to drop from sleepiness. Finally Kostya couldn't stand it any longer. He climbed into bed and said:

"I'm fed up with all this nonsense. They can break their silly necks on the roof for all I care. I'm going to sleep."

I pulled the chopper out from under Mishka's pillow and put it next to me and lay down to try and get some sleep. The noise overhead quieted down gradually, until it sounded like rain pattering on the tin roof. I fell asleep.

We were awakened by a terrific banging on the door. It was broad daylight and there was a great commotion outside in the yard. I snatched up the chopper and ran to the door.

"Who's there?" I shouted.

"Open the door, you chaps! What's the matter with you? We've been knocking for half an hour!" It was Vitya, our Pioneer leader!

I opened the door and the boys crowded into the room. Vitya noticed the chopper.

"What's that for?" he asked. "And what's the meaning of this barricade here?"

Kostya and I related what had happened during the night. But the boys wouldn't believe us. They laughed at us and said we must have imagined it all out of sheer fright. Kostya and I were so sore we could have cried.

Just then there was a knocking overhead.

"Hush!" cried Kostya and raised his finger.

The boys quieted down. Rat-tat-tat! The rapping noise was distinctly heard. The boys looked at one another. Kostya and I opened the door and went outside. The others followed. We walked a little away from the house and looked up at the roof. Perched up there was a plain, ordinary crow. It was pecking at something, and its beak went "Tap, tap, tap" against the tin roofing.

When the boys saw the crow they burst out laughing and the crow flapped its wings with fright and flew away.

Several of the boys got hold of a ladder and climbed up on to the roof.

"The roof is covered with last year's rowans!" they shouted down to us. "That's what the crow was pecking at."

How did they get there, we wondered. Then we noticed that the branches of the rowan-trees spread over the house. In the autumn when the rowans are ripe they must fall right on to the roof.

"But who knocked at the door, then?" I said.

"Yes," said Kostya. "What were the crows doing, tapping at



out door? I suppose you'll say they wanted to come inside and spend the night with us."

No one could answer that one. They all ran over to examine the door. Vitya picked a rowan up from the door-step.

"They didn't knock at the door at all. They were picking up the rowans from the door-step, and you thought they were knocking at the door."

We looked and sure enough there were some rowan berries on the door-step.

The boys had a good laugh at us. "Aren't they heroes! Three of them scared by one crow!"

"There were only two of us," I said. "Mishka slept all through it."

"Good for you, Mishka!" cried the boys. "So you were the only one who wasn't afraid of the crow?"

"I wasn't afraid at all," said Mishka. "I slept and didn't hear anything."

Ever since then Mishka has been considered the brave one, and me and Kostya, the cowards.



Gardeneez

A day or two after we arrived at the Pioneer camp last summer, Vitya, our Pioneer leader, announced that we were going to plant our own vegetable garden. We got together to discuss how to organise the work and what vegetables to plant. It was decided to divide up the garden into small plots and assign teams of two Pioneers to each plot. There would be a competition for the best plot and the winner would get a prize. The leading teams would help the lagging ones so that the soil would be thoroughly cultivated and yield a good harvest.

Mishka and I asked to be put in the same team. Before we came to camp we had agreed that we would work together and go fishing together and everything.

Vadik Zaitzev proposed having a Challenge Banner to be awarded to the team that finished the digging first. Everybody agreed and it was decided to pass on the banner to the best planters and then to the best weeders. And the team that raised the biggest harvest would take the banner back to town.

Mishka and I made up our minds to win that banner.

"We'll win it at the start and we won't let go of it all summer and it'll go back to town with us," said Mishka.

We had been given a piece of land near the river. We measured it, marked off the plots and stuck in wooden markers with numbers on them. Mishka and I got plot No. 12. Mishka wasn't satisfied. He ran off to Vitya to complain that we had been given the worst plot.

"Why is it the worst?" Vitya asked.

"There's a hole in the middle!"

"What about it," laughed Vitya. "Besides, that's not a hole, it's a hoof-print."

"There's a tree-stump on it," grumbled Mishka.

"The other plots have tree-stumps too."

But Mishka wouldn't listen.

"It will have to be dug up!" he cried.

"Well, go ahead and dig it up. If you need help the others will lend you a hand."

"Thanks, we'll manage ourselves," said Mishka huffily. "And help the others too."

"That's the spirit!" said Vitya.

Everyone started digging, Mishka and I as well. But every few minutes Mishka stopped digging to run and see how much the others had done.

"If you don't get to work we'll soon be way behind the others," I told him.

"That's all right," he said. "I'll catch up."

He started catching up, but in a little while he was off again.

We didn't get much done that day because pretty soon the dinner bell went. Mishka and I wanted to rush off to the plot after dinner, but Vitya stopped us.

"That will be enough for one day. We'll only work in the mornings. After dinner we'll rest. Otherwise some of you chaps will overdo it the first day and won't be able to work the rest of the time."

The next morning Mishka and I went off to our plot before the others and started digging. After a while Mishka asked Vitya for the tape-measure and began measuring to see how much we had dug and how much was left. After that he did a little more digging and then began measuring again. And each time he measured he found we hadn't done enough.

"Of course we haven't," I said. "Because I'm doing the digging. All you do is measure."

He threw down the tape-measure and started digging again. But he hadn't done much when his spade struck a root and he stopped digging to pull the root up. He pulled and he pulled but it wouldn't come up. He turned over the whole plot and part of the next one, trying to get it out.

"Leave it alone!" I said. "What are you bothering with it for?"

"How was I to know it was half a mile long?"

"Well, let it be."

"But it has to end somewhere, hasn't it?"

"What difference does it make to you?"

"I'm that kind of a person. If I start something I've got to see it through."

And he grabbed the root again with both hands. I got angry, went over to the root and hacked it loose with my spade. Mishka took the tape-measure and measured it.

"Look at that," he said. "Six and a half metres! Now if you hadn't cut it off it might have been twenty metres!"

I said: "If I'd known you were going to dawdle about instead of working I'd never have hitched up with you."

"Go ahead and work by yourself if you like. I'm not forcing you to work with me."

"After I've dug up most of the plot already? Nothing doing. But we certainly won't be the first to finish."

"Who says we won't? Look at Vanya Lozhkin and Senya Bobrov. They've dug even less than we have."

He went over to Vanya Lozhkin's plot and began jeering at them:

"Some diggers! We'll have to lend you a hand pretty soon."

But they drove him away. "You'd better get to work or we'll be lending you a hand."

I said: "You're a fine one, making fun of others when you've done hardly anything yourself! I'm sorry I hitched up with you."

"Don't worry," he said. "I've thought up a wonderful idea. Tomorrow we'll have the banner on our plot, you'll see."

"You're crazy," I said. "There's a good two days' work to be done on this plot, and it'll be four days if you carry on like this."

"You'll see. I'll tell you my plan later on."

"All right, but do get to work now. The ground won't dig up itself."

He picked up his spade to start digging, but just then Vitya said it was time for dinner, so he threw his spade over his shoulder and led the way to the dining-room.

After dinner we all helped Vitya make the banner. We found a piece of wood for the staff, cut and sewed the cloth and painted the staff in gilt paint. Vitya wrote the inscription "Best Gardener" in silver letters on the banner. It looked very handsome.

"Let's make a scarecrow as well," said Mishka. "To keep the crows off our garden."

Everyone liked the idea enormously. We got a pole, tied a stick across it for arms, got an old sack for a shirt, and stuck an earthenware pot on top for a head. Mishka drew eyes, a nose and a mouth on the pot with charcoal and our scarecrow was ready. It did look a fright! We stood it in the middle of the garden and had a good laugh at it.

Mishka took me aside and whispered in my ear: "Here's my plan. Tonight when everyone is asleep we'll go and dig up our whole plot, all except a little bit which we can easily finish tomorrow. We're sure to win the banner then."

"If you would only work," I said. "But you keep fussing with all sorts of silly nonsense."

"This time I'll work like blazes, you'll see."

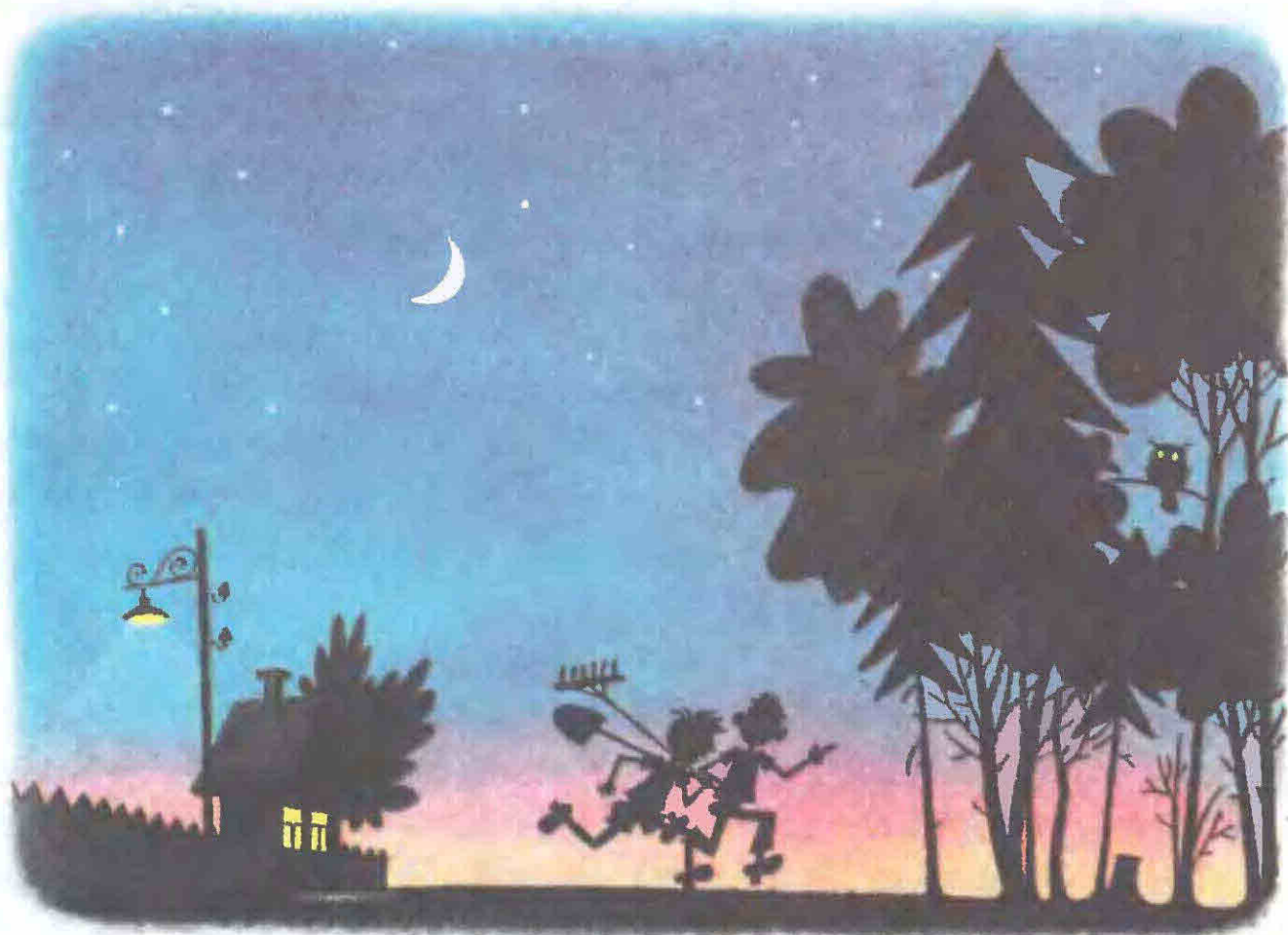
"All right. But if you don't, I won't either."

That night Mishka and I went to bed with the others. But we only pretended to go to sleep. When everything was quiet Mishka gave me a dig in the ribs. I had just dozed off. "Wake up," he said in a loud whisper. "We'd better get started or we'll have to kiss that banner good-bye."

We crept out of the dormitory, got our spades and hurried off to the plot. It was a bright moonlight night and everything stood out clearly and distinctly.

In a few minutes we had reached the plot.

"Here we are," said Mishka. "This is our plot. I can tell by the stump sticking up in the middle."



We set to work. This time Mishka really did work and before long we had dug all the way up to the stump. We decided to pull it up. We loosened the earth all around it and pulled at it as hard as we could, but it wouldn't budge. We had to hack away the roots with our spades. It was hard work, but finally we got it out. Then we evened out the ground and Mishka tossed the stump over to the next plot.

"That's not a nice thing to do," I said.

"Where are we going to put it?"

"Not on our neighbours' plot anyway."

"All right, let's throw it into the river."

We picked it up and hauled it down to the river. It was very heavy and we had a nasty time with it. But finally we got it down to the bank and dropped it plonk into the water. It floated down the river looking like an octopus with the roots sticking out all over it. We watched until it was out of sight and then went home. We were too tired to do any more digging that night. Besides, we had only a little bit left to dig now.

The next morning we got up later than the others. Oh dear, how achy we felt! Our arms ached, our legs ached and our backs felt as if they were breaking!

"What's the matter with us?" said Mishka.

"Too much digging in one go," I said.

We felt a little better after we had moved about a bit, and at breakfast Mishka started boasting to everyone that we were going to win the banner for sure.

After breakfast we all went off to the garden. Mishka and I didn't hurry. We had plenty of time!

By the time we reached the plots all the others were busy digging away like moles. We laughed at them as we strolled by.

"You needn't try so hard because you can't win the banner anyway!" we told them.

"You'd better get to work, you two!" they shouted back.

Just then Mishka said: "Look at this plot. I wonder whose it is. They've hardly dug anything yet. They must be at home fast asleep."

I looked at the marker. No. 12. "Why, it's our plot!"

"It can't be," said Mishka. "We've done far more than that."

I thought we had too.

"Perhaps someone has gone and changed the markers for a lark."

"No. All the other numbers are right. Here's No. 11 and there's No. 13 on the other side."

We looked again and saw a tree-stump sticking up in the middle. We couldn't believe our eyes.

"Listen," I said. "If this is our plot what's that stump doing there? We pulled it out, didn't we?"

"Of course we did," said Mishka. "A new one couldn't have grown in its place overnight."

Just then we heard Vanya Lozhkin on the plot next to ours say:

"Look, fellows! A real miracle! There was a big stump here yesterday and now it's gone. Where could it be?"

Everyone ran to look at the miracle. Mishka and I went over too.

What had happened? Yesterday they had less than half of their plot dug and now there was only a small corner left.

"Mishka," I said. "You know what? It was their plot we dug up last night. And that stump we pulled out was theirs too."

"It can't be!"

"Well, it is."

"Oh, what donkeys we are!" groaned Mishka. "What shall we do now? By rights they ought to give us their plot and take ours. All that work done for nothing!"

"Shut up," I said. "You don't want us to be the laughing-stock of the whole camp, do you?"

"But what shall we do?"

"Dig," I said. "Dig like blazes."

We picked up our spades. But when we started to dig, our poor backs and arms and legs ached so much that we had to stop. We had worked so hard on our neighbours' plot that now we hadn't the strength to finish our own.

Before long Vanya Lozhkin and Senka Bobrov finished their plot. Vitya congratulated them and handed them the banner. They stuck it in the middle of their plot. All the others gathered round and clapped. Mishka couldn't stand it.

"It's not fair!" he said.

"Why isn't it fair?" said Vitya.

"Someone pulled that stump out for them. They said so themselves."

"It isn't our fault, is it?" said Vanya. "Suppose someone wanted it for fire-wood. That's their look-out, not ours."

"Maybe someone dug it up by mistake," said Mishka.

"If they had it would be lying about here somewhere."

"Maybe someone threw it into the river," Mishka went on.

"Maybe this, maybe that. What are you getting at?"

But Mishka couldn't keep quiet.

"Someone did the digging for you last night," he said.

I kept nudging him to hold his tongue. Vanya said:

"Maybe they did. We didn't measure our plot."

We went back to our own plot and started digging. Vanya and Senka stood watching us and snickering.

"Look at them," said Senka. "They're as slow as turtles."

"We'll have to lend them a hand," said Vanya. "They're way behind everyone else with their digging."

So they lent us a hand. They helped us with the digging and they helped us to pull out the stump, but we finished last just the same.

Someone suggested putting the scarecrow on our plot since we were the last to finish. Everybody thought that was a wonder-

ful idea and so the scarecrow came to our plot. Mishka and I felt very sore about it.

"Cheer up!" said the boys. "If you do your planting and weeding well we'll take the scarecrow off your plot."

Yura Kozlov made a proposal: "Let's award it to the team that makes the worst showing with the rest of the work."

"Yes, let's!" shouted the others.

"And in the autumn we'll present it to the team with the worst crop," said Senka Bobrov.

Mishka and I decided to work hard and get rid of that nasty scarecrow, but try as we did it stood on our plot all summer long. When planting time came Mishka got everything mixed up and planted beet-roots on top of the carrot seeds. And when we did the weeding he pulled up all the parsley instead of the weeds, and we had to plant radishes instead. I wanted to quit several times but I didn't have the heart to leave a chum in the lurch. So I stayed with him to the end.

And would you believe it, Mishka and I got the banner after all. To everybody's surprise we got the biggest crop of squash and tomatoes.

There was a fuss!

"It's not fair," said the others. "They were behind everybody else all the time and they got the biggest crop. How's that?"

But Vitya said: "It's perfectly fair. They may have been slower than all the rest of you but they worked the soil thoroughly and they tried hard."

Vanya Lozhkin said: "They had a good bit of land, that's what it is. Me and Senka got a bad plot. That's why we have a poor harvest although we worked hard too. And they can keep their old scarecrow. They had it all summer."

"We don't mind," said Mishka. "We'll take it with pleasure."

Everybody laughed. Mishka said: "If it wasn't for that scarecrow we wouldn't have won the banner!"



"How's that?" everyone asked.

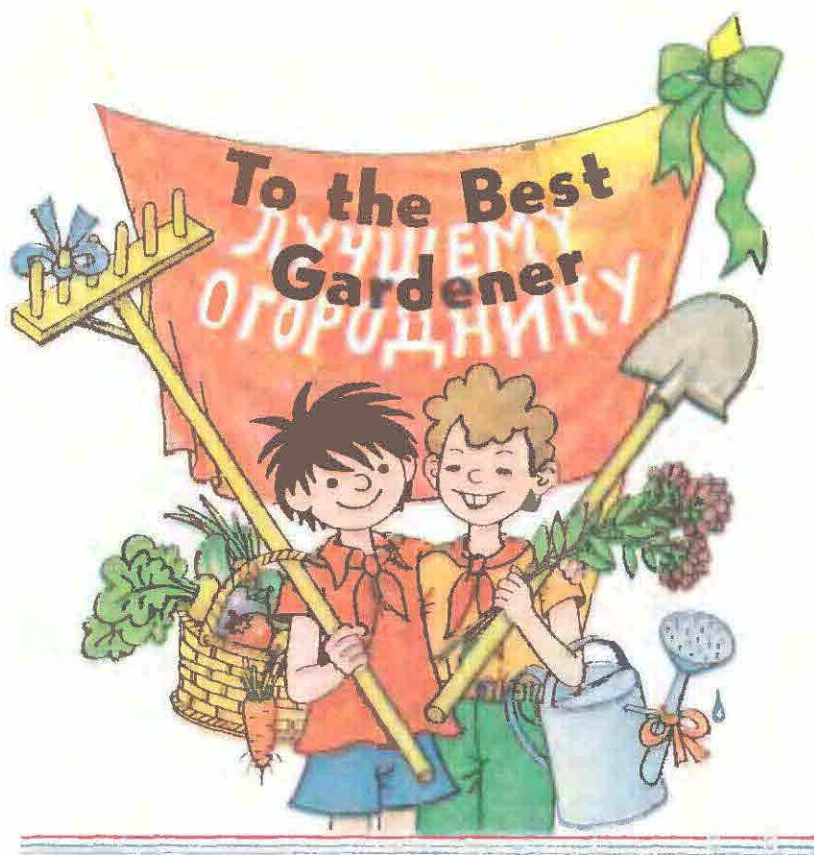
"Because it drove the crows away from our plot and that's why we have the biggest harvest. Besides, it reminded us all the time that we had to work hard."

I said to Mishka: "What are we going to do with that silly old scarecrow?"

"Let's go and throw it in the river," said Mishka.

We took the scarecrow down to the river and threw it into the water. We watched it sail down the river with its arms spread out and we threw stones into the water to make it go faster. When it was gone we went back to the camp.

That day Lyosha Kurochkin photographed Mishka and me standing on our plot beside the Challenge Banner. So if you would like to have a picture of us we shall be glad to send you one.









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